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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2009

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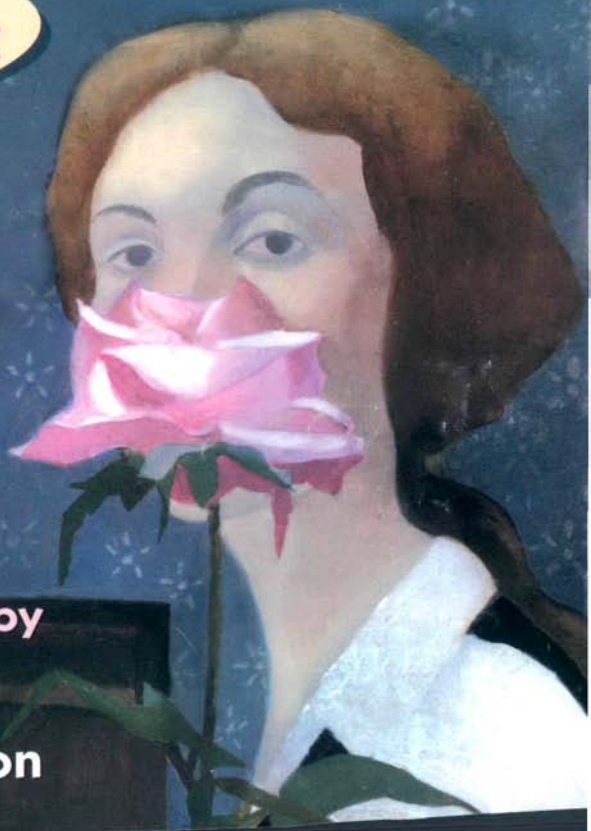

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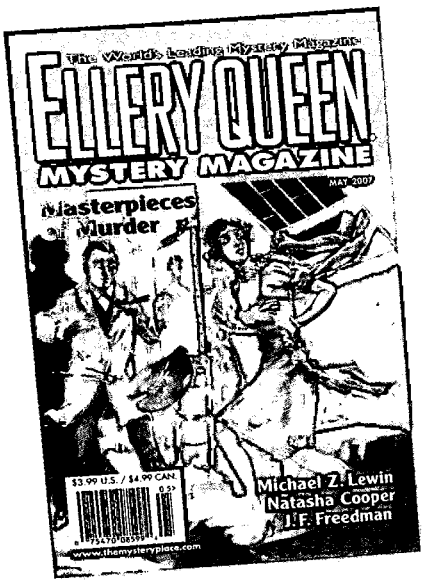


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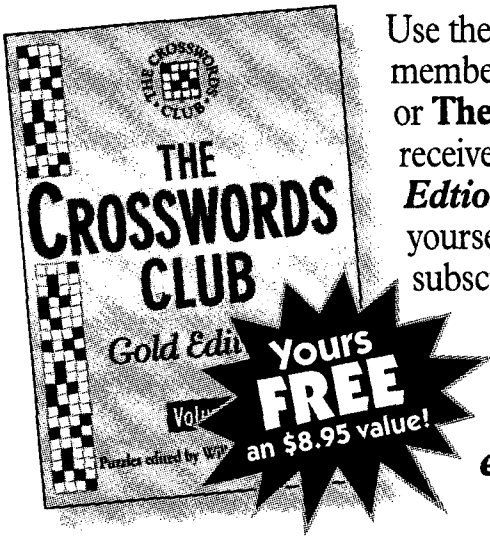


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# CONTENTS

## FICTION


6 NOTHING IS EASY by Jas. R. Petrin

30 A SMALL CIRCLE by K. J. Egan

39 THE GARDEN TOUR by Janice Law

49 CHARLIE AND THE PIRATES by Gary Alexander

62 SANTA BABY by Melodie Campbell

66 A DREADFUL DAY by Dan Warthman

81 SHANGHAIED by James Lincoln Warren

102 REMEMBERING TALLY by John M. Floyd

110 ELIMINATE THE MIDDLEMAN by John H. Dirckx

130 AFTER THE DREAMTIME by Janet E. Irvin

140 ANY MEANS SHORT OF MURDER by Kathy Lynn Emerson

160 THE ICICLE JUDGMENT by Mike Culpepper

168 A WALK IN THE PARK by Iain Rowan

178 THE PORCUPINE TREE by Eve Fisher


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January/February 2009
*Cover by Jorge Mascarenhas*

## DEPARTMENTS

4 EDITOR'S NOTES

5 THE LINEUP

48 MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

60 DYING WORDS Acrostic puzzle by Arlene Fisher

98 REEL CRIME by J. Rentilly

139 THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER by Willie Rose

156 BOOKED & PRINTED by Robert C. Hahn

186 SOLUTION to the December Dying Words

188 THE STORY THAT WON



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# HAPPY HOLIDAYS . . .

Edward Kinsella III

## FROM THE STAFF OF AHMM



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# The Lineup

GARY ALEXANDER's stories have appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Woman's World*, among other publications. His story "Pickled Zillionaires" appeared in the May 2008 issue of AHMM.

MELODIE CAMPBELL works as a marketing executive in Toronto. Her first story for AHMM, "School for Burglars," appeared in the July/August 2007 issue.

"The Icicle Judgement" is MIKE CULPEPPER's AHMM debut. He lives with his wife in Nelson, British Columbia, Canada. He recently completed a crime novel.

JOHN H. DIRCKX retired in 2003 after practicing primary care medicine for forty years. His story, "First Cousin, Twice Removed," appeared in the September 2008 issue of AHMM.

K. J. EGAN'S fifth novel, tentatively titled *Where It Lies*, is forthcoming from St. Martin's Minotaur. He has worked with judges in the New York State court system for twenty years.

KATHY LYNN EMERSON (a k a Kaitlyn Dunnett) writes both historical and contemporary mysteries. She is the the author of the book *How To Write Killer Historical Mysteries: The Art and Adventure of Sleuthing Through the Past* (Perseverance Press).

EVE FISHER lives in South Dakota and teaches college history. Her last story for AHMM, "The Lagoon," appeared in the April 2008 issue.

JOHN M. FLOYD's mysteries have appeared in *The Strand Magazine, Woman's World*, and other publications. He is a regular blogger at www.criminalbrief.com.

Booked & Printed columnist ROBERT C. HAHN reviews mysteries for *Publishers Weekly* and *New York Post*, among other places, and is the former mystery columnist for the *Cincinnati Post*.

JANET E. IRVIN makes her AHMM debut with "After the Dreamtime." She recently retired from high school teaching and has completed a young adult novel.

JANICE LAW'S 2002 novel, *The Lost Diaries of Iris Weed*, was a finalist for the 2002 Connecticut Center for the Book Fiction Prize. Her story "Golden Years" appeared in the January/February 2008 issue of AHMM.

JAS. R. PETRIN contributes frequently to AHMM. His story "Car Trouble" (December 2007) was selected for *The Best American Mystery Stories 2008* (Houghton Mifflin).

J. RENTILLY is a Los Angeles-based journalist who covers film, music, and literature for a variety of national and international publications.

IAIN ROWAN is the author of over thirty published short stories. His novel *One of Us* was shortlisted for the 2006 Crime Writers' Association Debut Dagger award in Great Britain.

DAN WARTHMAN taught English to adults in China for three years and worked as a Boston private detective for ten years. "A Dreadful Day" is his first published story. He has finished a novel set in Beijing.

JAMES LINCOLN WARREN is a frequent contributor to AHMM; he is the editor and founder of "Criminal Brief: The Mystery Short Story Web Log Project" (www.criminalbrief.com).

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# NOTHING IS EASY

## JAS. R. PETRIN

"Look," Lenny Lorpa said, hunching a little closer to Skig, thin fingers working nervously at the chipped surface of Skig's kitchen table, "twenny big ones an' I'm back in the game. Eight points, Skig, I'll give you eight. Two better'n what you're askin', you shove it out there onna street."

Skig studied Lorpa, the wrinkled guy bright as a peacock once, so faded and desperate now, with hollow eyes, a sweep of glistening stubble on one cheek where he had done a lousy job with his razor that morning. Skig was prompted to say yes but wasn't convinced he would see the money again. And he had other reservations. This was a guy, three months ago, could lift a finger and have you dumped, cold meat, in a vacant lot.

Lorpa's begging was uncomfortable.

"So I give you the twenny," Skig said, "what good does it do?"

"Puts me back in the game, like I said. Makes me a player again." Bone-rack shoulders rising, knobby lumps under the rumpled golf shirt.

"You started out, you got your money from the brothers."

"The Tuittes, yeah." He pronounced it "toots". "A long time ago."

"So with the twenny—"

"Who knows? Maybe I shop it out, get somebody to change some things, startin' with that skuzball Weiss—"

Skig creaked back in his chair. "Better I don't know."

"Listen, what you do know is that I got problems. I didn't, I wouldn't be here, right? You're wonderin', are you gonna see your money again. I understand that. For that reason I don't mind telling you. I know I can trust you, Leo. Everybody knows Leo Skorzeny's okay. You're not like those other pieces a crap."

"See," Skig said, "problem is, I got to wonder if you can handle this. Somethin' goes wrong, the twenny, I got to come looking for you. I don't want to have to do that."

Lorpa studied him a moment with mild surprise, as if trying to imagine such an implausible situation. Then he said, "You got no worries there. I can handle things. Guaranteed." He leaned forward suddenly. "I won't dick around. Double in two weeks."

"Double—"

"In two weeks. End of the month, I walk in here an' slap the twenny plus



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Hank Blaustein

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another twenny down on this table. Your stake back plus twenny large, Skig. Where else you gonna make that kinda juice?" His face fell suddenly into grim lines, harsh and threatening. "I need this float, Leo. I gotta have it." He held his ferocity, then slumped, turned sheepish. "Hey, I'm beggin' you, Leo. Me, Lenny Lorpa. Gimme the cash."

Seeing the guy out the kitchen door with two chunky envelopes riding under the limp PGA shirt, Skig wondered if he'd done the right thing. At one time Lorpa could have gone home and pulled twenty large out of a sock. But it wasn't that way now. He wasn't "the boss" anymore. He'd been sidelined, cut out of the action by his own money man, Silly Weiss. Skig figured the old man was lucky to be walking around with no holes in him, never mind plotting to recover his empire.

**Halifax rocked with one headline grabber after another. Ernie Caul, pulled out of the harbor . . . Joe Proulx, crushed under a steel plate at the container dock . . . Tommy Jakes and Hector Sappoda, a double whack.**

He locked the door, plugged the kettle in, and rattled some Tylenol-threes out onto the countertop. Washed the painkillers down with a splash of Teacher's, straight up. Then he stood in the middle of the room with his eyes shut, his right hand pressed down low against his gut. His mind turned to food, what he could have for lunch that wouldn't eviscerate him. In the back of the freezer lurked a pizza that he had been eyeing for several weeks, one of those small single servings, a year old, but each time he reached for it, his gut screamed at him. Lorpa wasn't the only one lucky to be walking around. No, he wasn't. Every quack Skig went to see told him how fortunate he was to be carrying what felt like a handful of broken glass around in his belly—fortunate compared to the alternative. Had they personally tried the alternative? No, they had not. Then why were they so damn sure? That question usually shut them up.

There was a tap at his door, and his eyes cracked open. Lorpa again? He lifted one corner of the curtain next to the fridge, and saw his neighbor and friend from down the street, Eva Kohl, standing on the stoop. She wore a men's powder blue shirt with the tails hanging out, a white top under it, and white slacks, and had one of her little plastic food containers clutched tight in her hands. He unlocked the door and pulled it open. She raised the container like an offering, smiling up at him.

"Homemade cream of chicken soup, Mr. Skorzeny."

"You musta been reading my mind," Skig said.

A retired hairdresser, Eva trimmed Leo's hair once a month, what was left of it. And lately she had become interested in nursing him back to health. Waste of time, he told her, but she was determined, and he let

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her get on with it. One reason was, her homemade soup was to die for. Maybe literally in his case, but he would go out smiling.

"Chicken soup," he said, a smile threatening to break out on his thick, square face. He sat down at the table. "Cure you of anything, right? My mother used to think so."

"If you think something helps you, it does, Mr. Skorzeny."

"You been cutting my hair, we been friends, how long? Three years? You can call me Leo, don't you think? Or Skig. I keep tellin' you that."

She rattled a pan out of the cupboard, switched on a burner at the beat-up range, and began heating his soup. "Leo's a nice name. I don't know why you let people call you Skig."

"Neither do I." A riddle from the mists of time. "Started back . . . let's see . . . I was a kid, my uncle called me that."

"He must have been a callous man."

"Callous, yeah, I guess you could say so." Uncle Joe had been some kind of enforcer for the Bar Harbor Longshoremen's local.

"Have you decided to let them do the operation?"

"The quacks?" He thought for a moment, then shrugged. "I guess I'm gonna have to do something. It's just, I dunno if I can trust them. A kid goes into doctoring today, he does it for the money. It's not like the old days, a doctor wanted to help people."

"Have the operation. The sooner, the better."

The stove was popping, the soup starting to smell pretty good.

"Your stove heats up fast," Eva said appreciatively. "Mine's not working worth a hoot anymore."

"Last time I came for a haircut you were having some kinda trouble with it. I told you I'd buy you a new one."

"And I told you that would be much too generous."

"So then I said I'd lend you the money. A woman cooks like you do, she ought to have a good stove."

"Borrowing money is a very bad idea, especially between friends. You told me so yourself, Mr. Skorzeny, some time ago." He started to argue with her, then stopped; he really had told her that once, he realized. The pot was steaming. She switched off the burner, ladled the contents into a bowl, and placed the bowl on a tray. Adding salt and pepper, a few soda crackers, a glass of milk, she put the tray in front of him. A piece of paper towel, folded fancy, served as a napkin beside the spoon. "And you're not the only one who says so. My mother always told me, if you borrow from a friend, you won't have that friend very long."

"Some reason we're talking about our mothers today."

"You really don't believe in borrowing money, do you?"

"No."

And he didn't. But he did believe in lending it. Almost eight hundred grand on the street this month, some of it floated to people who liked to say they were his friends.

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He spooned up some hot soup, blew gently on it, then tasted it. He closed his eyes, savoring the flavor, and winked at Eva. "The best."

"I'm glad you like it." Beaming, she rinsed the pot in the sink, along with the plastic container, then sat down across from him to watch him eat. "Anyway, I'll get a new stove. I'm already working on that."

"Save up the dough? Is that your plan?"

"That's one way. Save up for one or else win one. I've been to the East Coast Home and Hardware Show at the Forum three times this week, and each time I buy as many tickets as I can afford on the range they're raffling off there."

He took some more soup and swallowed it. Beautiful. He said, "How many winners can there be, and how many tickets you buy?"

"Six winners. One for each day of the show. I don't know how many tickets I bought. Quite a few now. And I'm going to buy some more today. If I don't win, then I'll go back to plan A—save up the money. I'm not in a big hurry."

You should be, Skig thought, remembering that first doctor's visit. The jolt. The sense of betrayal. The sudden realization of how little time he had left on this earth. Everybody should be in a hurry. He said, "You play the lottery, too, I seen that. I seen the tickets stuck up there on your fridge."

"You can't win anything without a ticket."

Skig lowered his spoon and eyed her sternly through a wisp of steam. "The stove. You know you don't have much of a chance."

"I have just as much chance as anyone else."

Which is practically zero, he wanted to say, but didn't. That would be too harsh. Knock her sand castle down. As for borrowing, he was glad not everybody held her views. If they did, he might not have any customers. Not such a bad thing, maybe, in Lenny Lorpa's case.

"I know what I told you," he said, "but this day and age, people need money, they borrow it. Poor people, rich people—everybody. I wouldn't even charge you interest."

She went to object again, and he raised his hand. "Okay, okay," he said. "Forget it. What part of 'no' don't I understand, right?" He tipped his head to the side. "Tell you one thing, though. You start canning this soup of yours, you'll rake in the dough. You'll put Campbell's right out of business."

She grinned back at him. "What a nice thing to say, Mr. Skorzeny."

"Leo. Call me Leo, remember?"

"All right—Leo!"

The end of the month came and went. No word from Lorpa. Things were happening, though. Oh, yes. Halifax rocked with one headline grabber after another. Ernie Caul, pulled out of the harbor, bludgeoned to death with a heavy rust-covered object, they figured, before being splashed. Ernie had been Silly Weiss's heavy lifter. Then two days later, it was Joe the Pro's turn. Joe Proulx, Lenny's driver and bodyguard, crushed

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under a steel plate at the container dock, not enough left of him to ID except for his size fourteen Adidas. And most recently, a double whack: Tommy Jakes and Hector Sappoda. These two had practically run the Lorpa empire before joining Silly's camp after Lenny's fall from grace. They were found out back of a Sackville restaurant—the Clam Shack—shoved so far down into matching green compost garbage bins, they had to be removed with tin-snips and a garden trowel.

After that, nothing. A lull in the storm. But Lenny was rumored to be running things again, if somewhat shakily, and Silly Weiss wasn't part of the landscape.

"Kids in a sandbox," Skig muttered. He didn't care about their feuding. But he did care about his investment. "Collection day," he said with a wheeze.

He considered phoning again, then rejected the thought. Lorpa wasn't taking calls. He shrugged into his jacket, reached for his keys, and walked through the graveled side lot around to the street. Skig's house, once a run-down service station, no longer had the pumps out front. He'd had those removed with the underground storage tanks. He'd bought the place cheap, and with some basic remodeling, had made it into his home.

The big door to one of the service bays was up, Creeper Culbertson in there just hauling down the hood of Skig's ancient Crown Vic. The Creep lived next door in a single room. He did all Skig's repairs. He was a decent mechanic but couldn't get steady work since his last parole out of Dorchester.

"Changed the oil like you wanted, Skig," he said, his long, shifty face showing a guarded disapproval, "but you should've let me replace the filter while I was at it, another ten bucks was all." He was narrow bodied, narrow shouldered, with big hands and feet.

"I only replace the filter every second oil change, you know that."

"Yeah, Skig, but jeez—ten bucks."

"You giving me push-back now, Creep?"

The Creep spread his big oily hands, warding off that insinuation.

"No way. Hey, it's your ride. I'm just tellin' you what I think, is all." He picked up a rag, cleaned each finger separately. Ventured a twitchy smile. "It's still all right if I do Buddy's transmission this week, use the other bay here? That way I can make a buck."

"I already said you could. What else you want?"

"Nothin', Skig. Just—thanks."

There were a couple of items gnawing at Skig's mind. Lorpa, of course; but also Eva—wracking his brain to find a way of helping her without getting her back up. Now he thought he had it figured. An idea that couldn't miss. Business first, though, always.

Riding downtown in the old Vic, which smelled pungently inside of saltwater and less salutary liquids after a dive into the harbor some time ago, he slowed when he reached the Citadel, then dropped to a creeping pace

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out front of a nicely remodeled heritage building that had CHEBUCTO LAND AND DEVELOPMENT chiseled grandly into its marble cornice work. He found a meter for his boat of a car, fed it coins, then hobbled up the stone steps. He hated steps. They made him feel his years, his substantial gut, and the torn-up nerve endings aflame in his innards.

He trudged past the girl at the lobby reception desk, barely treating her to a look. Her quizzical gaze followed him, and he gave his head a shake. He wondered why so many young girls nowadays tried so hard to look like hookers. Her boyfriend, if she had one, probably walked around with the crotch of his pants around his knees, something that, when Skig was young, you only saw at the circus. Bozo the friggin' clown.

Progress.

He took the elevator to the eighteenth floor.

"I'm Leo Skorzeny," he said to the receptionist on the executive level. "You heard of me?"

She stared back at him, faintly alarmed. Sandwich in her left hand, mouth slightly agape, nodding her head ever so slightly.

"He in?" Older, a little gray threading her hair, but still a handsome woman. She had to set down her sandwich and finish chewing in order to answer him. Her coffee mug had a cartoon cat on it. The desk was cluttered with small photos of cats.

"Do you have an appointment, Mr. Skorzeny?"

"Is he in or isn't he?"

She looked flustered, pretty gray eyes jumping around. Then relief steadied her, as if the cavalry had just arrived, and at the same moment Skig felt a hand on his arm. He turned and found himself gazing up at a young, fair-haired loogan, early thirties, so developed in the chest and shoulders he seemed about to pop a couple of buttons. His knotted silk tie strained to encircle his neck.

"Trouble here?" the kid said with a hopeful grin on his face.

"I dunno," Skig said, brushing the hand away. "You lookin' for some?"

"This is Mr. Skorzeny. He wants to see Mr. Lorpa," the receptionist added, as if she couldn't quite believe it. "But I don't believe he has an appointment."

"No tickee, no washee," the kid said, reaching for Skig's arm again. This time Skig didn't bother brushing it away. Instead, he gripped a fistful of silk tie, and slammed the kid's head down on the two-drawer filing cabinet so hard a framed cat picture bounced in the air and landed flat on the floor. "I'll explain this slowly," Skig said, "since apparently nobody's listenin'. I'm here to see your boss. If he isn't in, tell me, an' I'll leave. If he is, I'm gonna have a short talk with him. You want me to run that by you again?"

The loogan made a strangling sound. His eyes bulged and his face grew redder, blossoming with petal-sized blotches of mottled white. As if he suddenly remembered who he was, he swung a wild hammy fist and connected with a corner of the desk. He gasped. "Do I take that as a 'no'?" Skig asked.

The receptionist, when the loogan's face hit the steel, jumped up from

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her desk and stared wide eyed. Couldn't pull her eyes away from the kid, gasping against the steel. She backed into a potted plant with her kitty-cat coffee mug clutched protectively in her hands. "Mr. Lorpa isn't here," she bleated out. "He doesn't come in on Wednesdays."

"What days does he come in on?" Skig asked.

She looked frantic. The kid was twitching, starting to make ragged, rasping sounds.

"He's very busy now. He's in the middle of a re-org."

"Is that what he calls it?"

"He's moving around a lot, comes in when he needs to take care of something. You should have phoned. I could have—"

"You're right. I should have," Skig said. He had phoned for three days and hadn't got past the voice mail. He picked the pen up off her desk with his free hand and shoved it at her. "Write this down. 'Leo Skorzeny was in. He wants to talk.'"

She set the coffee mug down, almost spilling the contents, and in stabbing movements, scribbled the words down on a sheet of paper.

"Your phone number—"

"He's got it. Tell him I'm lookin' for something. He'll know."

Skig let the kid go. The kid staggered backward, lost his balance, and sat down hard on his butt, broad shoulders crushing the potted plant. He was gasping like a fish, plucking at his throat with his good hand, a look of bewilderment on his piebald face. The girl quickly scooped up her cat picture.

"Sorry about that," Skig said.

He took the elevator back down to the street.

"See, what I want," Skig explained to Pinkie Hemholtz, "is for her not to know where it actually came from." They stood in front of the Corning glass-topped range, Pinkie slightly to one side of it, with a ruby-ringed hand caressing the digital clock. He wore an unadorned black baseball cap, and a black tee that had PINKIE'S APPLIANCES silk-screened across it.

"Hey," Pinkie said, "you set me up here, Skig. Nobody else was gonna loan me the money. You know I'll help you out, only how am I gonna do that? I can't just send a truck around an' shove a brand-new stove in the lady's kitchen. What's she gonna say?"

"You just gotta tell her she won it."

"Sure. Like that'll work. She's gonna know she didn't buy no ticket."

"She's been buying tickets. Some kitchen range thing down at the Home Show. You show up with a stove, tell her she won it, that'll be it. It's gotta work."

"You think?" Pinkie looked unconvinced.

He hurried off to deal with a dough-faced woman who had just wandered in. The woman's kids were already climbing in and out of a clothes dryer, slamming the door on one another. "The playground's down the end of the street!" Pinkie snarled testily, and the woman, alarmed at his tone, quickly

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scooped up her kids and beat it. Skig wondered how to get around the fact that Eva Kohl would probably grill Pinkie pretty good. At Pinkie's return he told him, "Your delivery guys might have to stonewall her, tell her that they just deliver the stuff. That you don't run no contests yourself."

"I could. And if she still wants to know?"

Skig glowered at him. "You're makin' this difficult."

"I'm tellin' it like I see it, Skig. Is she the kind of woman, sees a chance to score, she's gonna grab a thing an' not ask questions? If she is, no problem. I won't have to have a backstory."

Skig knew Eva Kohl was not that kind at all. She would never accept a thing unquestioningly that fell into her hands seemingly out of the blue. If she found a billfold on the sidewalk, bulging with hundreds, she'd trot it down to the nearest cop shop.

"No," he admitted. "She's not like that."

"Too bad."

Too bad, maybe. But then, that's what he liked about her. The independence.

"Anyways, we'll go with it. The contest idea. But leave it kinda iffy, she starts askin' you a lotta questions. You say this is your best stove?"

"The best I got."

"Fine. Put it on the truck. The address I told you." He pulled his wallet out. "How much?"

"At cost, Skig. For you, always at cost."

Skig thumped his wallet, waiting.

"It rounds off to seven, Skig. Just lemme have seven."

Skig took seven one-hundred dollar bills out of his wallet and pressed them into Pinkie's hand. "Looks like your unsatisfied customer is back again," he said, nodding at the front of the store, where the woman with the kids was re-entering. This time she and her brood were accompanied by a puffy pigeon-breasted man, all of them looking ready for battle. "Nothing is easy," Pinkie said. "You notice that?"

They say you see stars when you get hit in the head. Skig had never observed the phenomenon, and he had been hit in the head more than a few times. Colored lights, though. He'd seen those. And this time he saw plenty.

He sank to his hands and knees in the rutted parking area out behind Pinkie's store, a wave of sick pain ripping down from the crown of his head to the back of his heels, but he had just enough presence of mind to notice a black Lexus idling in the alley a few feet from his Crown Vic. Then a pair of shiny black shoes stepped around his face, a toe connected with his kidneys, and he dropped face forward on the gravel with the small of his back on fire.

"You slipped and fell?" Eva Kohl said worriedly, pressing a dishtowel

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soaked with cold water against the egg rising on Skig's grizzled skull. She had returned to collect the plastic soup container, and found him sitting on the stoop, vomiting into the weeds where a patch of flowers used to be. Clucking her tongue while she picked his key ring up off the ground where he'd dropped it, she had let them both into the dingy kitchen. He sat on a kitchen chair, stocky legs wide apart, large, square hands gripping his dusty knees. "Look at those pants," Eva said, tsk-tsk-ing. "They're going to have to go to the cleaners."

"I'll rinse them out," Skig mumbled, "they'll be fine."

"If there's any rinsing to be done, I'll do it. You're not in any condition to rinse anything."

"Look—"

"How did it happen? Did you walk into something?"

"That's it."

"You need to be more careful. You need to look where you're going."

She was right about that. He was growing dopey. The kid from the office? Not likely. He thought about the Lexus. Not a car he had seen before. A little pricey for a flunky, anyway. Of course, there was always a chance the car was borrowed—or stolen. He chided himself silently for not glancing out his side window a month ago to see what model of car Lenny Lorpa owned.

"Do you want me to drive you to your doctor's office?" Eva asked.

"No. I'll be okay."

She let it drop. Another thing he liked about her. She didn't hammer away at a thing; no was no.

He saw her off with her empty plastic soup container and his grimy trousers in a crinkly Dollar Store bag. Then he tossed the cold cloth in the sink, dragged himself into the sitting room, and collapsed into his sagging La-Z-Boy. Hauling the handle back, he eased his legs out straight, his back hurting as much as his front for a change. And his head, jeez his head was something else. His eyelids closed. Whoever it was had sandbagged him, he hadn't seen it coming at all.

Without opening his eyes, he groped for the phone on the side table, cupped it in his hand, and pressed the redial button. This time when he asked for Lorpa's line, miracle of miracles, they put him through. All of a sudden, Lenny was shouting at him. All the old attitude there.

"Where the hell do you get off strollin' in here and bustin' up my place, Leo? What kinda crap is this? You got somethin' on your mind, you pick up the phone and speak to me personally, understand what I'm saying?"

"You finished, Lenny?" Skig said.

"And now you're being disrespectful!"

"You remember," Skig said, "you were here for the loan, I told you I didn't want to come looking for you."

"You just hadda pick up the phone—"

"Right. So what about it? The forty?"

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There were scuffling noises. Papers being pushed around. Then Lorpa's voice bursting back on the line.

"Okay, so I'm a few days over, Leo. A few days! You couldn't trust me? You couldn't trust Lenny Lorpa?"

"In my business," Skig said, "that isn't the thing. The money's due, it's due. That's how it works. Now I got to add on more juice."

"What?" Lorpa was aghast. "On toppa the extra twenny?"

"That's how it works. I got to charge you six points."

"You're not charging me nothing! You're already getting double your money back. I swear to God, I must've been crazy lettin' you sucker me into this arrangement. You loan me twenny, I got to pay back forty? Who squeezes that kinda juice? You tell me! An' you want six on toppa that?"

"Six on the first twenny, not the interest. I'm not asking for juice, the second twenny."

"You're not? You're *not*?" A sound came over the line like an overstretched bladder about to burst. "Well, that's freakin' big of you! Now, you listen to me, Leo—"

"No, Lenny," Skig said, "you need to listen." He was tired. His head hurt, his back ached, and his belly felt like it was stuffed with razor blades and twisted bottle caps. "That's the deal we made. That's how it is. You get the money here tonight, then you and me'll be square."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I got to come around your office again. That's what I do. An' starting next week another six points. So twelve bills juice this week, another twelve next, that's twenny-four hunnerd plus the forty, if you put it off that long."

There was a silence on the line so cold that Skig glanced at his jacket hanging behind the door. Then Lenny croaked out, almost in a whisper, "I'll get it to your place tonight, Skig. I'll get it there. But only because I promised. No other reason, you understand?"

"That'll work, Lenny. And one other thing—"

"You're not through?"

"Did you send a guy lookin' for me today, comes at you sideways, drives a Lexus?"

"I didn't send nobody nowhere. But I'm thinkin' about it. I could have you floatin' in the harbor, Skig. I hope you appreciate that, dammit!"

"Send a courier, I'll wait up," Skig said.

He put down the phone.

At one time Skig could have sat up the entire night, no problem. Bottle of scotch on the table, a deck of cards. Pot of coffee for when the scotch bit too hard. But not anymore. He made it to half-eleven, fighting for it, then his chin rolled onto his collarbone and he was out. He woke up about three, realized no one had knocked, no one had called, and he dragged himself to bed.

At ten past eight the next morning, Skig was sitting at his beat-up

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kitchen table with a cup of last night's reheated swill warming the palm of his hand. He had his threadbare, green terry robe wrapped around him, leather moccasins that might have been through the Indian wars on his feet. Suddenly, someone pounded on his door several times with a heavy fist.

"Jeez!" Skig barked. The first harsh blow had rattled the dishes.

He heaved himself up, trudged across the floor to the kitchen window, and peered out from behind the shade. It was Lorpa, and he had a small army with him.

Skig paused a moment, thinking carefully. Then he opened the dishwasher that hadn't worked since '97, reached under the upsidedown, purple Tupperware bowl that was always there, and brought out the Glock 19 he kept handy for situations. He checked the clip, dropped the gun in the pocket of his robe, and rattled the door open.

Lorpa stood on the stoop. He was seething. There were at least five legbreakers hovering behind him, one of them the young loogan who had tried to put the arm on Skig in Lorpa's office.

"You got an appointment?" Skig asked.

"We had an appointment last night, dammit, and my man never came back! Where is he?"

Skig didn't answer right away, too bemused at what Lorpa was wearing. All gangsta'd up in a white satin Sox jacket, striped warmup pants, and a backwards Yankees cap, everything over-sized and sagging loosely on him. A dark pair of Mafias straddling his head. He looked like a mummy staring out of a clothes closet. Skig checked to see if the old man had the crotch of his pants around his knees, but he seemed to have drawn the line at that particular fashion statement.

"You got a new tailor?" Skig asked.

"Again, no respect!"

"Maybe we should respect each other," Skig said. "You come in, have a nice cup of coffee, tell your knuckle-draggers to climb back in the circus wagon." Lorpa hesitated, gnawed his lip a moment, then waved his thugs away. "All right, I will. But don't try any smart stuff!"

Skig held the door open to let Lorpa squeeze by—jeez, the smell of cologne on the guy!—then closed up and slipped the chain on to keep the alley apes at bay. Hold those heavyweights back maybe three or four seconds, tops. The Glock swung heavily against his thigh as he turned.

"You take cream and sugar?"

"I take it straight from the pot."

Skig poured a splash of reheated coffee into a mug that said GO AWAY on it, two for a buck at the Frenchie's down the street, and set it on the table in front of his visitor. "You should talk about tailors," Lorpa said, staring down the length of his nose at Skig's ratty green robe. "I wouldn't be caught dead dressed like that. You look like two yards of bad grass. It explains your face. Some nearsighted golfer teed off on you."

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"You brought the money?"

"That's a joke, right?"

"No."

"Don't play games with me, Leo. I'll call my guys in here and straighten you out for keeps."

"You're the one playing games. It's another week. Now I got to charge you another six points."

"I sent the money! Sent a guy here last night! I get up this morning, they tell me he never came back. He's missing, Leo, his vehicle's missing, an' I want to know what the hell's goin' on!"

Skig sat down, spread his hands flat on the table, and studied Lenny Lorpa carefully. He noticed how thin and tight the old man's skin was getting, how the joints of his fingers were all swollen up. Lorpa tried the coffee, made a face, and set the cup back down. Was this some con the old man was trying on him, rankling about the vig he'd agreed to? Could be that. But the attitude seemed genuine, an old man bewildered and rubbed the wrong way. Besides, if he was pulling something, he wouldn't be here. He'd send around somebody with muscle to put on a dog and pony show.

"Tell me somethin'," Skig said, "those problems. You got everything put back together again?"

"You know I have." The old man looked fierce for a moment, then the hackles lowered. "Maybe a few wrinkles here and there, but sure, it's all back together."

"What kinda wrinkles?"

Lorpa bridled. "Nothin' you need to know!"

"I need to know *some*thin'. We're in this together, at least on the twenny."

It stopped the old man for a second. He had his coffee mug raised halfway, and now he set it down again, keeping a steely gaze on Skig.

"If you're playin' me . . ."

"I'm not playing you. But somebody is. They're playing both of us." He was silent a moment, then said, "You think maybe it's Weiss?"

While Lorpa settled back and chewed on that, someone hammered on the door again, three times, very loud. Skig heaved himself laboriously and painfully to his feet, unhooked the chain, and opened up. The kid from the office stood there, his lips stretching into a little grin when he saw Skig. Glancing down, Skig saw highly polished black shoes. But then, the loogans hovering behind the kid had shiny schooners on their feet too.

"Oh," the kid said, "it's you."

"Who'd you expect?"

"I need to talk to Mr. Lorpa."

"What is it, Lawrence?" Lorpa's raised voice called from the kitchen table.

"Lawrence," Skig said, cocking an eyebrow, still with his eyes on the kid. "I never took you for a Lawrence. I dunno. I don't know what would work."

The grin was stitched in place; he couldn't shift it. The kid replied

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through his smile, "What happened to your face?" Then louder so the old man could hear. "They found Moke, Mr. Lorpa."

"Where?"

"Eastern Passage. Goodie's Boatyard."

"And?"

"He's dead. Looks like somebody did a number on him, then dumped him."

The old man came out of his chair like a spider, elbowing Skig's bulk out of the way.

"Who found him?"

"One of the guys there."

"What about the cash?"

"They don't say nothing about that, Mr. Lorpa."

Lorpa said an ugly word, told the kid to find out more, then scuttled back to the table.

Skig pushed the door shut. He said to the old man, "You see what I'm getting' at here?"

"What are you talking about? I don't see nothing. Except you had a reason to take Moke out, feed me some b.s., an' try an' hit me for the money twice. The twenny. Doubled to forty. An' you want juice on toppa that!"

"I wouldn't do that. Take Moke out."

"Oh, you'd do it, all right."

"A couple of weeks ago you sat in this room telling me how I could be trusted. Now suddenly I took your courier out, an' I'm tryin' on a hustle? I don't operate that way, and you know it."

"All right," Lorpa said, "maybe it was Sill." He drummed his thin fingers on the table, concentrating. "The guy was watching my place, he coulda followed Moke here, then jumped him. But he'd be more likely to follow me. Why would he care where Moke goes?"

"He couldn't of known about the cash?"

"No way."

"Does he know I helped you with that float?"

The old man's eyes grew shifty. "He might."

"See, 'cause if he knew Moke was your courier, he might've thought that by hitting him he could get at both of us."

"Okay, okay. Might've. Could've. But I'm sayin' he didn't know where Moke was headed. How could he?"

"You don't seem too sure."

While the old man sat glowering, there was another pounding at the door. Skig yanked it open, discovered the kid there again grinning, and told him, "You're gonna find it uncomfortable with busted knuckles stickin' outta your ear." As before, the grin didn't falter. The kid spoke past Skig to the old man.

"I checked back, Mr. Lorpa. First cop on the scene, a lady cop, she's saying, 'Money—what money?' "

"She would, wouldn't she? If she found it!"

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"Maybe we should take the little fat guy here apart. I'm figuring he knows more than he's saying."

"You figure? You're doin' my thinking for me now?" Angry again, Lorpa banged his chair back against the wall, brushed past Skig on his way out, then stopped. He turned on the stoop with the door handle clutched in his brittle fingers. "Okay, Leo. I'm gonna push this around some more. But you're not off the hook just yet. I'll be gettin' back to you."

"Don't take too long."

"Yeah, yeah, the juice. You're gonna keep tackin' on the juice. Six a week! Next time, you know what I'm thinking, I'll take my business down the street."

Skig watched him get in the car, a light gray Chrysler, the kid holding the rear door open for him. The goon mobile was a green Ford. There was a parting flash of Boston Red Sox jacket as the door of the Chrysler slammed shut, tinted glass closing the old man in. On the way out of the lot, the kid aimed his finger at Skig out the rolled-down driver's window and fired an imaginary round. His grinning lips said, *Pow!*

"Back at you," Skig said.

He wondered about Joe Proulx, how he had managed to get between a steel plate and the concrete yard down at the container pier.

"So what happens," Pinkie explained, "the guys get the truck backed against the curb, they're halfway up her walk with the new stove, she comes out the front door and says to them, 'That for me?' Jokin', you know—like that. Then they got to set the thing down an' let her look at the paperwork. Her name's right there in the 'deliver to' section, but it don't say nothing about no contest. 'Must be a mistake,' she says. Nope, they tell her, no mistake. She won the stove somehow, an' they're there to deliver it. All in order." Pinkie sighed, a thin keening sound whistling over the phone into Skig's ear. "She's happy about it. *Real* happy. Only she still makes 'em wait on the sidewalk while she goes inside an' brings out a mittfull of ticket stubs. She's got, like, a couple dozen of 'em. Which one, she wants to know, is the winner? She'll just make a phone call, double-check, make sure it's on the up-an'-up. Well, they can't *tell* her which is the winning ticket. Lady, they say to her, we're *givin'* you somethin'. We're not takin' nothing away from you. Well, she says, she'd really like to have the stove, but she don't want nothin' she's not entitled to."

"So she wouldn't accept it?"

"Make a long story short, yeah. I mean, no."

It was Skig's turn to sigh.

"I know just how you feel," Pinkie said.

"An' this was yesterday?"

"Late yesterday afternoon."

"Try her again. She's a very sympathetic lady. Maybe if you go there in

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person, the manager, insist that she won the prize fair and square, explain that if she don't take it she's creating a major headache for you . . ."

"An' the ticket?"

"I might have the answer to that. I'll meet you there. Say five o'clock?"

Might be wise, Skig reasoned, to ask around Eastern Passage, some of the guys he knew out there, learn what he could about this courier he was supposed to have whacked. He backed the smelly old Vic out of the repair bay, pointed it downhill, and within minutes was crossing the MacDonald Bridge into Dartmouth. The morning rush had ended. It was a beautiful day. Yachts and sailboats drifted like gulls on the harbor approaches, an enormous car-carrier picking its way delicately among them. He thought about Eva, how obstinately correct she was. But she was no more obstinate than Leo Skorzeny. She was getting a new stove, and that's all there was to it.

At the boatyard he left the Vic outside the fence and walked through the gate the last two hundred yards. He preferred not to; his belly hurt like hell. But he wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible.

There were a lot of new faces here; he had to search a while before he spotted one he knew. Carl Besterhill, the yard super, noticed Leo at the same time. He pushed some paperwork into another man's hands and came slowly forward. Tall, athletic, going to gray but not an ounce of fat on him, Carl peered down at Skig warmly but suspiciously.

"Morning, Leo. Something I can do for you?" He glanced along the yard. "I hope none of my guys . . ."

"No, nothin' like that," Skig said. "It's just I'm curious about what happened here last night."

"The dead guy?"

Skig nodded.

"He owed you or somethin'?"

"Or somethin'."

Carl rolled his big shoulders under his short sleeve shirt.

"Don't really know if I can tell you much. Buddy didn't work here. He wasn't one of our guys."

"Anything you got, Carl."

"Well, it was Erwin found him. Erwin Garr. Fills in nights for me. Home in bed right now. Anyway, Erwin thought he saw something—didn't know what—shoved in behind the forklifts parked out there at the gate. Switched the yard lights on and seen it was a dead guy. Then he called the cops."

"You figure a dump, then?"

"Seems like it. He didn't notice no activity earlier on around there. You know, no fight or nothing."

"How about vehicles? Somebody driving in, oops, this is the wrong place, turns around and heads back out again?"

"Cops asked him that same question. Said he didn't think so. Then later he told me, yeah, maybe he had seen a vehicle there by the gate. It

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didn't come into the yard, so he just ignored it."

"Cops mention they found any cash on the guy?"

"Nope, didn't tell us nothing."

"I guess they wouldn't. They say anything about the injuries?"

"Erwin heard them talking. Beat to death. Lots of broken bones. Like the guy that did it was freakin' out or something."

"What kind of vehicle?"

"Big car. Dark paint. Erwin figured it was a Lexus."

A Lexus. Skig sniffed.

Carl peered more closely at him. "You look a little rough yourself, Leo."

"I slept funny," Skig said.

Driving away Skig thought, a Lexus, right. It wasn't the only juice that was adding up. Mister Shiny Shoes had a lot to answer for.

When he let himself back into his kitchen, an insistent light was flashing on his counter. The red LED on his ugly old answering machine. Five bucks at a neighbor's yard sale, Skig's concession to new technology.

It was Lorpa. Skig called back.

"Jeez, when are you gonna get a cell phone? I guess I should be glad you got a phone at all, that we don't have to shout at each other through rolled-up magazines. Maybe send up smoke signals. What I'm phoning about, someone took a shot at me—no, listen. If it wasn't Silly, then I don't know who it was. I called him. He denied it. I told him we gotta talk. He said no way, not without witnesses."

"He's not so dumb."

"He eats a lotta fish, that guy. Anyways, I elected you."

"Thanks. He's good with that?"

"He's one a those guys who trust you."

"Right," Skig said. Interesting, he thought, how talking was suddenly an option when slugs started flying in Lorpa's direction.

The meeting was set up for two o'clock on neutral ground—the China House up there in the park. Not a regular feed trough for either Silly or Lorpa, but not so neutral for Skig since the owner, Stanley Chu, fed his Vegas habit on loans from Skig when his junkets didn't pan out. Skig was about to mention that point when the old man abruptly hung up.

At the China House, he parked out back and went in through the kitchen. The room was steamy, drab, and tiredlooking, but it smelled great. Stanley's niece, Lucy, looked up from the chopping board with a pretty smile. "You stay around for dim sum, Mr. Leo?"

"I hope so, kid," Skig said.

He pushed through the swing door into the dining room and found himself practically on top of Lorpa, the guy sitting in the back booth with a jug of coffee at his elbow. True to his word, the old man had left his monkeys behind, but Skig was sure they weren't too far back in the trees. He gingerly eased his bulk in behind the table—he hated booths. Helped

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himself to a coffee from the steaming carafe. "You think," he said, "this is a smart place to meet?"

"What?" Lorpa made an ugly face. "What's wrong with it?"

"If there's trouble, what about Stanley?"

"What about him?"

"He could get hurt. Or his daughter, there in the kitchen. They could get pulled into this."

"They got nothin' to worry about. There's not gonna be any trouble. We're gonna get this thing settled with Weiss, an' then we're outta here, that's all."

"I was thinking," Skig said.

"What about?"

"I was thinking, what if this isn't about Weiss?"

"What are you talkin' about? Of course it's about Weiss. It's been about him from the start. We wouldn't be sittin' here right now if it wasn't Weiss tried to push me out."

"All that part, yeah, but I'm not talking about that. I'm talkin' about later. I'm saying what if, now, there's somebody else shovin' his oar in. Somebody that's been been watching. Sees this situation—you, Weiss, an' now me—he figures he can make somethin' out of it."

"You're nuts. He'd have to be outta his tree. Nobody, they see sparks flying between me an' Weiss, is gonna stick their nose in an' get it whacked off. 'Cause that's what would happen. Anybody with half a brain knows how stupid that would be, goin' in."

"Sure. If they had half a brain."

Lorpa waved the idea away. "Stop it. You're hurtin' my head. You come in late on this, now you're a know-it-all. Gimme a break. You know nothin'!" His gaze flicked past Skig to the door, and he straightened, hauling his scrawny shoulders back. "Here he is. Now you just stay outta this."

Skig turned slightly and saw the figure of Sylvester Weiss framed in the light of the open door. Weiss took a good look around, glanced back over his shoulder, then stepped inside. He was a tall, dapper man in his fifties, with neat graying hair combed back above his ears. He wore a tailored dark wool overcoat that hung to his knees and flashed a black and blue satin lining when he moved. The businessman look. And here was Lorpa looking like he was ready for a jog in the park. Two guys battling for the same turf, they couldn't have looked more different.

Weiss waved somebody away outside before letting the door swing shut, then, stiffly erect, he covered the last few yards on his own, making at least that concession to the agreed arrangement. Like the old man's own monkeys, Skig knew Weiss's gorillas wouldn't stray far from their keeper.

Lorpa spoke first, getting right to it.

"I don't see no briefcase, no package in your hands or nothing."

Weiss scowled. "What're you talking about?"

"I said on the phone, the main thing, we got to get that missing cash settled. You got it—I know you got it!—so let's not waste time arguin' about it."

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Weiss stopped at the end of the booth. He made no move to sit down and join them. His handsome face was tight and concentrated, making it clear he wasn't about to take any attitude. Not from the old man or anyone else.

"I don't have nothing of yours."

"Not anymore, you don't, 'cept for what you took off of Moke."

"I didn't take nothing off Moke. I haven't even seen Moke!" Weiss turned suddenly to Skig. "You listening to this? I'm gonna stick around an' take this crap? I don't think so!"

"What you ought to do, the two of you, is come at this another way," Skig said. He hiked his squat frame ponderously sideways, slid off the end of the cushion, and stood up. He barely reached Weiss's shoulder. "Go back a month or so. Back to the start of it. What brought this whole thing on inna first place. The money part, that'll sort itself out. Shout if you want me."

Both men stared at Skig as if they didn't know whether to agree with him or shoot him. Then Weiss took Skig's place behind the table, Lorpa snarling at him, "You hadda take out Joe the Pro?"

"I didn't take out Joe!"

"All he did was drive me around, for cryin' in the sink, an' you hadda take him out!"

Skig moved to the kitchen door and pushed it open. The first face he saw was Lucy's. She was standing by the sink next to a stack of bamboo steaming baskets, pale and scared. And he saw why. Two jabonies, the kind that were ugly on purpose, were in here with her. One was helping himself to a scoop of chicken fried rice from an out-sized wok, and the other leaned against the sink scratching his private places like a football player. And that wasn't all. Suddenly, here came the kid—Lawrence—trotting up the stairs from the basement with a swizzle stick pinched between his teeth.

"Well, well," the kid said, spitting the stick out and refreshing his smile, "if it isn't tubby. Come to raid the fridge?"

"What are you three doing here?" Skig shot back. "No grunts, that was the deal." He plucked the plate of rice out of the big loogan's hands and set it on the counter. "You think this is a self serve?" As the guy started to respond, Skig came right back at him, stepping on his feet, putting his hand in the red, angry face, and giving him a shove. The loogan toppled backwards like a tree, falling against the alley door. Skig rapped the panic bar with his fist, and the guy fell out into the lane. Skig turned back, ready for the other two, but they sidled past him without any persuading.

"Enjoy your snack," the kid said. He cocked his finger at Skig over his shoulder. "Pow," he said.

Skig watched them go, his eyes narrowing. He noticed they were walking strangely fast. And what was Lawrence doing in the basement? Something wasn't right. He turned suddenly and reached for Lucy. "Anybody upstairs?"

She shook her head.

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"Just you in the place?" He was gripping her elbow, escorting her briskly to the alley door.

She nodded. "What is wrong? What is it?"

"Time to leave!" Skig barked at her. "Out now!"

"But, I must—"

"Out!"

She had her hands spread, about to grab the doorframe, when the question was decided for them. There was a terrific slamming sound, and a huge whoosh, as if the place had been hit by a hurtling steam locomotive. A blast of air rushing up from the basement shot them through the door, out onto the graveled parking patch. Skig landed hard on his stomach, the pain in his gut screaming objections at him. He took a deep breath, gritted his teeth, then got slowly back up on his feet.

Lucy was staring at the restaurant, horrified, hands pressed against her face. The shattered windows were disgorging great clouds of thick, acrid smoke. Part of the stucco siding had fallen off in a huge slab.

He limped over to her. "You okay?"

She nodded, but she was trembling, her hands now clasped under her chin, as if praying. Over her shoulder Skig spotted something. A Lexus, dark blue or black, drifting off down the lane like a shadow. He brushed gravel off his sleeves and trouser legs, helped Lucy over to a stack of blue plastic milk crates, and sat her down on one. People were starting to appear at doorways, gawking at the billowing smoke.

"You wait for the ambulance," he told her. "The cops. You don't mention I was here."

She kept nodding. Her eyes glistened.

Skig hobbled to the Crown Vic, one hand pressed tight against his gut.

He caught the Lexus in three blocks. After that he had no trouble keeping up with it. It was the kid, of course. Skig wasn't too surprised. And he wasn't flying or anything, but pretty much taking a drive in the park: confident. Nor were the two giant monkeys riding with him; they must have had their own vehicle. Better and better.

"Smart not to let your boss know you own a ride like that," Skig muttered at the back of Lawrence's car. "He might've started thinking you were ambitious or something." Dropping back half a block, he let a bus edge in. "Okay, kid, let's see where we're goin'."

He had to wait till they reached the tip of the Arm before the Lexus showed signs of stopping. It bulled through the rotary, meandered on another click or so—some beautiful homes here overlooking the water—then brake lights flashing, it dived down a steeply sloping drive to a house partly hidden by trees, the bristling masts of a yacht club a hundred yards or so off to the right. Skig pulled over, stopped the Vic at the curb, and gave the kid five minutes. Then he got out of the car and trudged heavily down the steep, winding drive.

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Reaching the Lexus, he glanced around. No other vehicles. That was good. Business affairs were best kept private. He stepped up onto a wide ceramic-tiled pad, a kind of large, raised patio, and tried the door. Locked. He punched a small, cut-glass pane out, protecting his fist in the sleeve of his jacket, then felt around inside and released the latch. Inside, he found himself in a large, open-concept area that held a giant wide-screen TV, a fireplace, and an enormous tropical fish tank that served as a room divider, the half wall of the kitchen. He noticed the tank could use a little TLC—scum on the sides, the water murky, tiny fish doing more floating than swimming.

There was nobody in the kitchen; no one in the dining room or in the powder room.

Skig sighed when he went through to the hall. Stairs again. But he started up them. Near the top he heard a toilet flush, and reaching the landing, saw a door standing slightly ajar. The door suddenly swung open, and shiny shoes stepped out. He wasn't wearing shoes now, though. In fact, he wasn't wearing anything. Spotting Skig, his eyes flew open. At the same moment, he pivoted on his left foot, raised his right, and launched a vicious kick at Skig's midsection. It took Skig by surprise. You don't expect people with bare feet to kick you.

Skig had a big belly, but it was hard as a bag of cement. The blow, coming from an angle and delivered on reflex, was aimed poorly and glanced off, the kid losing balance and stumbling forward, almost falling into Skig's arms. Skig's stomach exploded in pain, and he felt himself heeling backward. He grabbed the kid's hair, and they went crashing down the stairs together. Skig felt the edge of every hardwood tread, made a complete backward somersault, and wound up at the bottom, thinking that he must have broken some important parts.

He had a tuft of hair in his hand.

The kid scrambled free, stepping on Skig's face as he headed back up the stairs.

Oh good, Skig thought, he's going for a gun. His own was back home in its usual place, under the Tupperware bowl in the dishwasher. He didn't like to go around town "rodded up," as the old-timers used to say.

He rolled onto one knee, then heaved himself to his feet. He could hardly straighten his limbs, his body hurt so much. Gripping the banister to steady himself, he clumped back up the stairs, see what the kid had waiting for him. Maybe talk his way around it. Maybe.

Upstairs, he plodded along the hall, pushed into the bedroom, and found the kid just inside the door, struggling into his pants. Skig gave him an elbow. With almost three hundred solid pounds behind the blow, the kid caromed off a highboy, and knocked a glowing lamp off a high-gloss bedside table. The lamp hit the floor, but the light stayed on. There was an automatic right there on the dresser, but the kid just had to put his pants on.

People were funny.

Skig said, "Guess I came at a bad time." Taking in the casual clothes laid

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out on the bed, the open suitcase propped against the footboard, already containing socks, underwear, and a black leather shaving kit. A small, slim carrying case beside it. "Goin' somewhere?"

"How did you get in here?" the kid bellowed at him across the bed.

"Door was open."

"The hell it was. You can't just walk in here! Get out!"

"I'm gonna do that," Skig said. "Soon as you hand back the cash."

"What cash? What are you talking about?"

Skig was already hauling the small carrying case across the sheets. He flipped it open. There was nothing in it but a couple of bath towels, though the lower one seemed kind of bulky. He dragged it out. Tight, bundled bills spilled out of it. "Maybe this is it," Skig said. "Maybe the cleaning lady stashed it here."

The kid made a sudden dive for the dresser, hand thrusting for the automatic right there beside his wallet and keys. Skig reacted. Stooped, gripped the queen-size bed, box-spring and all, and heaved the whole business up into the kid's face. The gun went off behind the mattress, and he felt a sharp pain in his gut. He winced and closed his eyes. Good one, he thought. Stepping back from the overturned bed, he ran his hand down under his belt.

Nothing warm, wet, or messy there.

Just another of his usual pains.

The bed teetered, then slowly toppled back toward him and crashed down on the floor, the kid on top of it. Unlike Leo, he had something wet, messy, and very red leaking out of him.

"Pow to you," Skig said.

"I guess Silly won't be a problem for you anymore," Skig said.

Lorpa ignored that. "You sayin' Lawrence had the cash?" He sounded feeble and old through his bandages, and uncomprehending, as if the explosion had knocked a few brain cells loose. He looked small and frail in the sturdy hospital bed. Kind of faded without his loud sportswear on. "*My* Lawrence?"

Skig nodded. "That's the guy. But he handed it over when I called him on it."

"What was Lawrence doin' with my cash?"

"My cash, you mean. An' yeah, that would be the question. What I think, I figure he was playing us all off against each other. You and Silly—me and you. See what he could get out of it." He cleared his throat. "Joe the Pro? That wasn't Silly. It was him."

Lorpa raised his arms, studied the bandages on them, lowered them again. "Why would he do that?"

"Let's guess. You think he liked money, maybe?"

Lorpa ignored that. Blinked at the ceiling. "I heard he was shot. That he shot himself."

"A guy might do that, his position, thinkin' you'd be coming around

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to visit him. He pops the restaurant, goes home, makes a call. Finds out you came out of it. Panics."

The old man concentrated on his IV pole, appearing to like that suggestion. It played to his vanity.

Skig cleared his throat. "Reason I'm here, some of the cash is missing."

"How much?"

"About six bills."

"Six?" Lorpa seemed relieved, as if expecting a bigger hole. "Well, that's not so bad."

"If you say so. Anyway, you can call someone, have it sent over to me."

Lorpa's eyes stopped roaming and fixed themselves suddenly on Skig again. They had lost their defiant savagery, looked yellow, red veined, and rheumy. But there was spark in them still. "You're *still* not happy?"

"If you have a guy drop it off today," Skig said, "that'd be good. Otherwise—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. More juice."

Skig shrugged his thick shoulders. "That's how it works."

"What happened here, it's all a mistake," Skig explained to Eva. "You didn't win the stove. I did. See, I won it for you. After you told me about that contest, I went down there, the Forum, bought some tickets, filled in your name. I got lucky."

"You bought tickets?" Eva Kohl said, her eyebrows lifting in frank astonishment. "In my name?"

They were standing at the curb in front of Eva's house, Pinky there with his muscle, two guys who horsed fridges and stoves the length and breadth of Halifax for a living.

"I meant to clear it with you, only I didn't get around to it. I was thinkin' about what you said—that you can't win without a ticket. I figured maybe I'd improve the odds."

"But Mr. Skorzeny, if that's the case, then you won the stove—"

"No, you did."

"But you have the winning ticket. I can't just take it for nothing."

"Oh, not for nothing. No, no. See, you got to pay me, I think it's twenny dollars, what I put up for the tickets there at the show."

"Oh." She thought a moment. "Well, that's different then."

"Yeah. Totally different."

"But I still think—"

"No. I got no use for it. I wouldn't know what to do with a stove if it fell on me. Unit like that, it's for somebody knows what they're doing. Someone like you."

"Well—"

"You want," Skig said, pushing his advantage, "to keep it totally on the up and up, you can pay for my gas, my time, runnin' up there to the park. Five or ten dollars, say."

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Eva gazed at the shiny new appliance, her eyes slowly mellowing. "Well, that *might* be all right—only I'd have to pay you the money now. Today. I couldn't owe it to you."

"Sure."

Eva pushed it around a bit more, figuring the angles, then finally surrendered with a large, happy smile. "I'll get the money right now." She turned brightly to Pinky. "All right, you can take it in."

"What about the old one?" Pinky asked. "You want, I can haul it away for you, drop it at the recycle."

"That would be fine."

Beaming with anticipation, she hurried happily off with the two loogans to show the way, scurrying ahead to hold the door of the building open.

"How you gonna handle it later," Pinky said, watching her go with his eyes half lidded, "they announce inna paper, onna TV or somethin', the list of people that won them things?"

"That happens," Skig said, "then I guess I'll need another story."

"What happened to your face? Looks like somebody stepped on it."

"Somebody did."

"Nothing is easy," Pinky pointed out. "You notice?"

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# A SMALL CIRCLE

## K. J. EGAN

I turned left out of the lavatory, the longer route that took me past the gallery of professional portrait photos the judges' association had arranged a few years back. A self-aggrandizing indulgence, Bill said at the time. But he posed anyway, with me paying the four-hundred-dollar photographer's fee out of my own pocket and calling it a birthday gift.

Bill's portrait hung halfway down the corridor in a gold-leaf frame. Often, when I knew I was alone, I would stop to look at the distinguished gray temples, the firm jaw, the steely gaze that withered many a lawyer and litigant. But sometimes, like today, I needed to feel those eyes on me, following as I passed.

I got back to chambers to find that Larry had arrived in my absence.

"Where have you been?" he said, unloading his usual brown-bag lunch from his briefcase.

"Ladies room," I said, peeking through the short avenue of doors that linked the three rooms of our chambers suite. Bill was still where I left him, thank God, his chair swiveled sideways and his arm resting on his desk.

Larry furrowed his brow, his usual way of showing confusion or displeasure. In this case, it could have been either. I shrugged, my own way of saying *hey it happens* or *no big deal* or *no harm, no foul.* But I knew, we both knew, that I'd broken the cardinal rule of chambers, the rule I enacted and enforced: Never leave the Judge unattended.

Larry pulled a handful of bound affidavits and exhibits from a motion file. He was my sister's son and had inherited her ability to dismiss the entire world around him and burrow into his own head. He was a good law clerk, and we were a good chambers, a family chambers. It would have worked no other way.

I went into Bill's office and partially closed the door behind me. He stared at the window where early in the spring I paid one of the janitors to install a lucite bird feeder that fit into the window frame like a sleeve. A dozen or so birds boiled against it. They all looked like sparrows to me. But the *Birds of New York* field guide was open on the desk, and Bill had started to write the word *finch* on a legal pad.

"Is it lunch already?" he said.

"Not yet."



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He tapped the crystal of his watch, raised it to his ear as carefully as a drunk at a traffic stop.

"It's not ticking," he said.

"Watches don't anymore."

In two years, Bill would celebrate his twentieth year as a judge. It was a benchmark in more ways than one, not the least being the pension calculations. I circled behind Bill and rubbed the back of his neck. He flinched, then relaxed. Probably, I knew, because for the brief instant that I was out of his sight I had ceased to exist.

"Feel good?" I said. His neck stubble rasped against my thumb pads.

"Mmmmm."

I squeezed past his chair and sat on his lap.

"How about this?"

I could feel his muscles tense as if to push me off.

"I can't see the birds," he said.

I leaned sideways, and he relaxed. After another few seconds, I felt him rising against me. At least some things still worked.

A commotion suddenly erupted in the corridor. Running feet, loud voices, scratching radios. I heard the distinctive click of the entry door's latch hitting the striker. Larry must have gone out.

Bill squirmed. I got up and smoothed my skirt over my hips.

"Do I know you?" he said.

Sometimes a question like that was dead-on serious, other times I thought I detected a spark of humor. I pinched his chin and stared into his eyes. They swam, then tightened into focus.

"Sure do, pal," I said.

I went back to my desk and resumed typing one of Larry's hand-scribbled decisions. There was more running out in the corridor, and then Larry burst through the door.

"We're in lockdown," he huffed. He shouldered the door shut and threw the deadbolt. "There's been a murder. Near the judges' elevator. Court officer said to go back to chambers. Keep the doors locked. Don't let anyone in until they give the all clear."

The all clear came an hour later. I heard a key slide into the lock and a voice say, "Knock, knock," as the door opened. The voice belonged to a court officer named Foxx.

"I need to sweep chambers," he said. "Safety precaution."

Foxx had a swaybacked posture that accentuated his hips, an oily gait, and a smooth pelt of prematurely gray hair. He quickly inspected the outer office and the middle room, then summoned Larry and me into Bill's office.

"Morning, Judge," he said.

"Hello," Bill replied in the loud, exaggerated voice he summoned when he detected a need to put up a front.

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We all stood around the desk.

"I can't tell you much," said Foxx, "except that the victim is a woman and didn't work in the building."

"Thank God," I said.

Foxx looked at me.

"I mean, at least it's not likely anyone we know."

"Maybe," said Foxx. "The cops can't release her name until next of kin are notified. Meanwhile, we're trying to trace her movements in the building as best we can. Did any of you see any woman this morning, other than court personnel?"

Larry answered first. He'd come off the public elevator, through the library, and directly to chambers just minutes before the commotion. He hadn't seen anyone.

I was about to say I hadn't seen anyone, either, when Bill piped up.

"I saw her."

"You saw the woman who was killed?" said Foxx.

"Sure did," said Bill. "Right there."

He pointed to a spot near where Foxx stood. Foxx looked at me for confirmation.

"He's thinking about Celeste," I said, referring to the cleaning woman assigned to our chambers.

"It wasn't Celeste," said Bill. "It was . . ." He rapped the desk with his hand. "You know . . . Why can't I?"

"It was Celeste," I quietly insisted to Foxx.

He nodded, thanked us for our cooperation, and told us to be careful. The killer was still on the loose.

I marked the onset as a day in March three years earlier. Bill was in the middle of a trial, a commercial dispute notable not only for the fact that it didn't settle (commercial litigants, he always said, were business people at heart and never risked a trial) but also because the lawyers had assumed the strident, antagonistic attitudes of their clients. "Worse than a divorce trial," he told me.

I left the apartment first. Bill stayed behind, still in his pajamas. He had scheduled the trial to resume at ten, but I'd noticed a reluctance to leave home as if he wanted to delay the inevitable. Ten o'clock came and went in chambers. At ten fifteen, I called the part clerk, thinking Bill had gone directly to the courtroom. He hadn't. At ten thirty, the part clerk called chambers. The Judge still hadn't shown up, she said, and the lawyers and their clients were getting antsy.

By eleven, I was shaking uncontrollably. Bill wasn't home, wasn't in the courthouse, wasn't reachable because he refused to carry a cell phone. Cynthia, Larry's predecessor as Bill's law clerk, went to the courtroom and adjourned the trial. I called our super and asked him to check the apart-

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ment. Nothing. I called the health club, our favorite breakfast joint, the tiny mystery bookshop where Bill liked to browse on rainy Saturday afternoons. No one had seen him.

The minutes crawled past, filled with anxiety, dread, a numbing confrontation with the reality of going forward in life without Bill. Cynthia suggested we call the police. I refused. It was too early for the police to get involved in a missing person case, I said. But Bill was no ordinary missing person, countered Cynthia, he was a judge. And that was just the point, I argued. Bill was a judge and had a reputation to protect.

We agreed, arbitrarily, to wait another hour. If Bill hadn't turned up, we would call the police. Luckily, in the fifty-fourth minute, the owner of a grocery store at the corner of our block phoned. Bill had just stumbled in, disheveled and confused.

Cynthia and I took Bill home. For an hour, he seemed to emerge slowly from a dense fog. He had no explanation for where he'd been. The entire day had been wiped clean.

Bill had a full neurological workup, but the tests revealed nothing. I mentioned the contentious trial to the doctor, and he said that a distasteful experience could trigger what he called a dissociative episode. But there was one other possibility, the doctor said, and a deep silence followed before he mentioned the dreaded A word.

Our life, at least the life I'd envisioned for us, dissolved before my eyes. Bill was only sixty-eight years old, young by judicial standards. Judges were statutorily forced to retire at age seventy, but could serve an additional six years in two-year increments under a process called certification. That is, a committee certified that the judge was physically and mentally capable of continuing as a judge. Bill, who had been a great athlete as a young man, kept himself fit and trim. We had relied, both financially and spiritually, on his serving until seventy-six. After that, I expected a life of travel, theater groups, and fine restaurants. But the prospect of Alzheimer's disease slowly tightening Bill's existence into small and smaller circles threatened these plans.

My job, I decided, was to protect Bill. Not just his person, which certainly could find itself in harm's way if left alone, but his reputation, his legacy, his career. He needed to hold onto his judgeship, however and for as long as he could. Once he let go, he was gone. First, I secretly met with the administrative judge, who respected Bill and agreed to reassign him to the motion part, where he could deal only with paper and not with people. Then, after Cynthia conveniently took a job with a large midtown firm, I induced Bill to hire our newly minted law graduate of a nephew. Bill, once so gregarious and friendly, essentially became a recluse inside the courthouse, staying in chambers, writing and signing decisions, never venturing into a courtroom. But he was still a judge.

I don't think Foxx believed for one minute that the murdered woman

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had been in our chambers. As an outsider, he would have seen Bill's confusion as momentary, a finely tuned mind trapped by a false assumption. Besides, a court officer knew better than to press a judge for details. The courthouse hierarchy was simple: The judges were on top while everyone else mucked in together down below.

The rest of the morning passed routinely. Despite the public's perception, few lawsuits went to trial. The vast majority of civil litigation was conducted on paper through written motions. In Manhattan, the motion part was an endless treadmill. Mountains of motions came in, mountains of decisions went out. Larry wrote them, the Judge signed them, and I photocopied and filed them. Day after day.

Larry's diligence occasionally descended into doubt. He worried about usurping the Judge's power by writing decisions the Judge signed without reading or comprehending. But that wasn't exactly the case. Though Bill would decline without hope of recovery, his decline was not a steady, unbroken line but a gently descending sine curve with subtle crests of names remembered, conversations pursued, memories associated with present events. On a good day, I reminded Larry, you could tell Bill about a motion, give him the facts and the arguments, and he would decide who should win and who should lose. Besides, neither of us could live with the alternative. If Bill left the bench, Larry would be out of a job and I would be saddled with caring for Bill on an inadequate pension.

"Is it lunch yet?" said Bill.

"Soon," I said.

I held a dozen signature pages from a dozen decisions. He signed the first few haltingly, then hit a rhythm for the last several.

"Those birds," he said, then went blank.

"Cute," I answered, to cover the fact that he lost his thought.

At lunchtime, Bill and I walked to Chinatown while Larry ate at his desk and worked. After our usual fare of chicken chow fun and steamed broccoli, we strolled around the park at the foot of Mulberry Street. There were three basketball courts in the park, and when the weather was good there were pick-up games in progress. Bill had started at guard for Columbia in his sophomore and junior years, and by the beginning of his senior year his ball-handling skills had attracted the attention of the New York Knicks and the old Syracuse Nationals. But a knee injury at the start of his senior season ended his basketball career. He was engaged to his first wife by then, and she convinced him to apply to law school.

I came on the scene much later, a young secretary newly divorced. Bill's wife died my first year on the job, and Bill, sweetly shy and pathologically polite, waited three years before asking me to dinner. We were married within a month.

It was nice being married to Bill, a good and decent man in and out of his robes. And it was nice being married to a judge. Being close to such

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power excited me. But the excitement paled against the serenity of a stable, secure future stretching to the horizon of my life. I'd never felt that way before.

We turned a corner in the park and began to pass the basketball courts. For me, the games were a gauge of Bill's day. Sometimes he stopped to watch, a spark of recognition in his eyes. Other times he walked right past, completely immune to the sound of balls dribbling on the pavement or clanging off the rim. Today, he stopped and twined his fingers in the chain links of the fence. Words bubbled silently on his lips: *pass, shoot, rebound.* I felt my spirits rise. Despite what happened at the courthouse this morning, a good day for Bill was a good day for all.

Back in chambers, Foxx sat in my chair, chatting amiably with Larry. He stood as soon as we entered, nodding to the Judge and then to me and in the process assuming a more official attitude.

"The victim has been identified," he said. "Cynthia Parker."

I must have looked like I went into a swoon. Foxx quickly rolled my chair behind me, but I grabbed Bill's arm instead. Bill stood rock solid, unable to react. I turned him around and walked him through the middle room and installed him at his desk. Foxx and Larry followed.

"I'm sorry," said Foxx. "I shouldn't have slapped you in the face with the news. The police are looking for a street-whack named Melvin Skoot."

"Why does that name sound familiar?" I said.

"He constantly files lawsuits against the City," said Larry. "We have a bunch of his cases."

He went into the middle room, opened a file cabinet, and came back with a decision.

"This is the earliest one," he said. "Skoot sued the City Department of Consumer Affairs for four million dollars. The City didn't answer, and the Judge awarded Skoot a judgment. The City woke up later, moved to vacate its default and to dismiss the case. The Judge granted the City's motion."

"How long ago was that?" I said.

"Before my time," said Larry. "Cynthia wrote those decisions."

"That's the critical connection," said Foxx. "The police think Skoot blamed Ms. Parker for taking his judgment away. They think the two crossed paths this morning. What they haven't figured out is what she was doing in the building early this morning."

"She's a lawyer," I said. "This is a courthouse."

"But she didn't have any case on any calendar," said Foxx. "She was scheduled to meet with a client at her office in Midtown at nine thirty."

I looked down at the top of Bill's head. His hair was still dark, with only the occasional strands of gray running through. I combed his hair each morning with a dab of Brylcreem. The part, I noticed now, wasn't quite perfect. Flecks of dandruff dotted the stiffly combed hair.

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"One of the guys in the lobby remembers her going through the mags at about eight thirty," said Foxx. "Do you have any idea what else she would have been doing here?"

"Sorry, I don't," I said.

"Did she stay in touch with the Judge?" asked Foxx.

"She owed her career to Bill, with what he taught her and the contacts she made."

I glanced at Larry, who tightened his mouth and shook his head. The law clerk transition from Cynthia to Larry had been bumpy. What had started as friendly advice slowly turned into constant hectoring. Larry's resentment grew, especially seeing the easy professional relationship Cynthia and Bill shared. Bill himself, before his decline steepened, spoke of Cynthia as if she'd never done anything wrong. Which was absurd, of course. She'd made her mistakes; everyone did. She was the one who awarded that judgment to Melvin Skoot; she was the one who needed to undo it to save Bill from embarrassment.

"I see," said Foxx. "Well, thank you, Mrs. Lonergan. You've been a great help."

Foxx left chambers, and Larry and I drifted back to our office and sat down. We tried to work, but got nowhere. The phone rang, and I answered. Larry flipped through a set of motion papers, bound them back together, then flipped through another. Finally, he got up and announced he was going for a walk.

The day's mail still lay on the corner of my desk, right where I'd dropped it before lunch. I peeked in at Bill. Chow fun sucked the energy out of him, and he curled forward in his chair, his head bobbing in the rhythm of sleep.

I slit the mail with my letter opener, organizing a pile for Larry, a pile for the part clerk, and the personal pile for Bill. The letter from the Committee on Judicial Fitness stopped me cold. After a moment, I slowly unfolded the letter, running my fingernails on the tiny raised letters that formed the names of the committee members. The raised letters annoyed me. Who used raised letters anymore, who ordered letterhead from a printer in the age of desktop publishing? People who were impressed with themselves and the power they wielded. That's who.

The letter scheduled Bill's interview, the final hurdle before certifying that he was healthy enough and competent enough to serve for the next two years. I folded the letter, slipped it back inside the envelope, and shoved it deep into the top drawer of my desk.

Larry returned.

"You okay?" I said after he settled behind his desk.

"Better now," he said. "Thanks."

The afternoon dragged the way it dragged the day Bill went missing. Only instead of sitting with Cynthia, I was sitting with Larry. There was nothing for me to do. Bill napped, and Larry tried yet another motion.

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Occasionally, I thought I felt his eyes on me, but passed the feeling off to an overactive imagination.

Just after four, Larry's private line rang.

"When? Where? That's good, I suppose." He hung up and looked at me. "Foxx. He said the cops arrested Melvin Skoot in the Village."

"We're safe," I said, as if trying to convince myself.

"When I went outside before," he said, "Foxx buttonholed me. Asked me questions about this morning. What time did I get here? What time did you and the Judge get here? I let it slip you weren't in chambers when I arrived this morning."

"Sure I was."

"No. You weren't. You said you went to the ladies room. Remember?"

I did, but so what? Nature called, and I answered. I'd left Bill unattended in chambers for what? Five minutes? Six minutes?

"Foxx knows," said Larry.

"About what?"

"Him."

Larry pronounced that simple pronoun as if it had a capital H. Him. Bill. Judge Lonergan. From whose position all good things in my life had come. And whose position could be cut off not by degenerative disease so much as by the arbitrary vote of a committee.

"Why is Foxx so interested?" asked Larry. "He's a court officer, but he's acting like a police detective."

"I don't know," I said.

That last hour of the day passed even more slowly than the others. I kept expecting the door to open, but it never did. Even the phone was abnormally silent.

At five, Larry and I went through our daily ritual of shutting down our computers and straightening our desks.

"Do you need me to wait?" he said.

We usually all three walked out of the building together, separating at the bottom of the long, dramatic courthouse steps for our different subway lines.

"Not tonight," I said.

Larry left, and I went into Bill's office. He stared at the bird feeder, his writing hand curled on a legal pad scrawled with gibberish. The bird feeder was empty of birds, something I'd never seen before.

I disentangled the pen from Bill's hand and stood him up. I pulled the raincoat over his arms, buttoned it once in front, and angled the wide-brimmed hat on his head so it covered one eye.

"You look absolutely handsome," I said. "My Judge, my dear."

We left chambers and headed down the quiet corridor of the courthouse after hours. Dust motes danced in the rays of the lowering sun. An electric floor buffer whined unseen.

The judges' elevator was still off limits, so we turned toward the bank

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of public elevators on the inner corridor. As we rode down to the lobby, I realized we truly hadn't fooled anyone. How could Judge Lonergan become a recluse, a prisoner in his own chambers, without something being horribly wrong? Still, the committee could have been kinder. It didn't need to send its most junior member—Bill's former law clerk, no less—to suggest that he withdraw his application to avoid the embarrassment of a denial, that his days on the bench were over.

The elevator reached the lobby, and we walked up the long, colonnaded corridor to the revolving front door. Outside, I took Bill by the arm. They were directly down below, parked and waiting at the edge of Foley Square.

"It's all right, Bill," I said. "Let's go."

Foxx stepped out from behind a column and took my other arm.

"He needs the support, not me," I said.

Foxx obediently crossed behind me and to Bill's other side. As we slowly descended the steps, Foxx reconstructed those critical minutes this morning, how I easily had enough time to escort Cynthia to the judges' elevator, strangle her with her own silk scarf, then take the long route back to chambers by way of the ladies' room.

"Excuse me," I said. "But why would a court officer care?"

"I'm with the Inspector General," he said. Then he leaned around Bill—I couldn't help thinking he had fetching blue eyes—and whispered, "Undercover."

NYPD took over at the bottom of the steps, the exact spot where the IG's jurisdiction ended. They separated us gently, pulling Bill toward the squad car and me toward the unmarked sedan. A detective arrested me for the murder of Cynthia Parker and recited my Miranda rights.

But my real concern, as it always was and always would be, was Bill.

"You can't leave him alone," I called as the detective bent me into the backseat. "Remember, you can't leave him alone."

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# THE GARDEN TOUR

## JANICE LAW

I didn't have much interest in the tour, gardens looking more like work than pleasure to me, but I agreed to go for Madeline's sake. My wife's been a trooper about rainy campgrounds and the dust and smoke of hot July reenactments, not to mention a whole lot of sewing. Quite a few members of the Connecticut Fourth Volunteer Infantry march out wearing jackets and pants my clever wife has run up.

So, when Madeline mentioned the historic garden tour, I got the car keys, even though I could foresee garden envy and maybe even some serious digging on the horizon. She's already got what I think of as a nice flower bed with roses, plus the annuals that we get down at the feed store or buy from the growers' stands, but I think she has ambitions. She's been talking up cottage gardens as "more suitable" for our old house, though I kid her that a cow and a pig would be more suitable yet.

The garden tour was something new, courtesy of the local historical society. They wanted to paint the house museum they run, and the local painter's good but not cheap. What they came up with was a house and garden tour—"the gems of our historic homes," to quote the posters—plus the gardens of half a dozen of the really serious horticulturalists in town. The historical society folks got themselves gussied up in period dress—not half accurate, between you and me—and collected the tickets, which went for ten dollars a piece, fifteen for families. Quite a project, Madeline told me, with some high-powered negotiations and a few wounded feelings over gardens that didn't make the cut.

To be expected: "It's still the same old story, a fight for love and glory, on that you can rely . . ." *Casablanca*, right? Hollywood stuff, but true nonetheless. The chief glory on the day would certainly be Alma Babcock's place. Madeline had visited it already, just a walk-by, you understand, but she'd seen enough that she'd been revisiting the topic ever since.

"Just wait till you see it," she said as we drove toward the center.

We'd already been to Patty and Harold's, very twenties, all ferns and garden statuary, greenery everywhere and smelling a bit of mildew, and Beth and Ron's, a modern shrubs and wood chips deal, professionally maintained and, to my eye, rather fighting with their gaunt old farmhouse.



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We'd stopped by Harold and Edgar's, too, for a Colonial herb garden that would not shame Williamsburg, and we'd had a long chat with Reverend Bruce and his wife, Trish, who go in for roses in a big way and who were serving a respectable punch and some of the best sugar cookies you've ever tasted.

**Victorian weeds suited her looks and gave her a touch of poetry.**

"She'd pay a fortune for bedding plants, if she hadn't put in that greenhouse."

"Alma put in a greenhouse?" I hoped greenhouse envy wasn't also in our future.

"Last fall. She'd always wanted one, you know."

"Greenhouses are expensive to run."

"I'm not sure it was the money," Madeline said. "It was the matter of authenticity. Everett hated aluminum."

Everett had been one of the founders and stalwarts of the Connecticut Fourth, meticulous in preparation and up on every period detail. If you wanted to know something about mid century soldiering, mid nineteenth century soldiering, that is, Everett was your man.

"He certainly could have afforded it," Madeline said. "He was some sort of financial consultant. Didn't they make out like bandits in the boom years?"

I gave her a look. Of course, she'd never been fond of Everett, though she got along pretty well with Alma.

"He was a good guy," I said, standing up for a brother-in-arms. I hadn't know him well outside of the Fourth, but he was certainly a good man in an encampment, hardworking, sensible—and imaginative too. He saw the poetry of the thing, the way the past gives you another dimension and lifts you out of your daily routine.

"You didn't have to live with him," Madeline said. "Did you know he once canceled their electric service? Did you know that?"

I did not. "A stickler for authenticity," I suggested, ready to leave it there.

"Everett," my wife said, "couldn't leave the authentic on the battlefield."

"Well," was all I said, for this did put Everett in a different light. And when I thought about it, he had gone to considerable lengths, packing in dried apples and pickled cabbage along with his hardtack and beans, and dabbling in period herbals. He swore by some liniment Alma had concocted out of their garden.

"It was all right for him," Madeline said, as we looked for a parking space. We weren't the only ones eager to see Alma's garden, and the street was almost parked up solid. "He was out all day, doing financial consulting downstate. I'll bet he had a computer and a data line and all the latest, while Alma was stuck at home without a washer and with oil lamps. She said her hair always smelled of the smoke."

Now my bride was exaggerating. "They always had electricity when I

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visited them," I said, and I'd been there plenty of times planning the affairs of the Fourth. The Babcock house was a Gilded Age Italian villa, Tuscany done up in claps and shingles. The interior was dark but handsome with high ceilings and period wallpaper and stenciling. The upstairs had been unfinished then and might still be, but I was betting that Alma, who was house proud and not quite as finicky as Everett, had gotten it completed.

"The fire marshal put a stop to the idea of gas lights," said Madeline. "And without gas lights, he figured they might as well suffer with electricity."

I nabbed a space behind Harry Thomas's pickup that took some fancy automotive maneuvering and spared me a comment.

"There!" said Madeline. "You've got to admit that's worth coming out for."

Alma's lawn was up a good four, five feet above the street, and I could see now that she'd laid out a series of low geometric flower beds. There were some big-leaved lilies that Madeline said were cannas in the center and, around them, brilliantly colored bedding plants. It looked nice, if rather artificial. I hoped that wasn't what my wife had in mind, because I could see weeding and digging and big bills from the garden shop. "Very tidy," I said.

"Very late Victorian."

Blessed relief. Our house is Greek Revival, and all this geometry would be quite out of line. "Not a cottage garden?"

"No," said Madeline with a laugh. "But wonderful just the same. Alma's really put the work into this."

"Do it herself, do you suppose?"

"I think so. Oh, and look at this!"

While Madeline was drawn away to some rarity, I went over to talk to Josh Gibson, tall, balding, hair bleached white and skin burned red, improbably dressed in a top hat and a three piece linen suit, and Chad Wilcox, looking excessively lean and tanned in red Bermudas and a REENACTORS DO IT IN HOMESPUN T-shirt. Chad's a keen Revolutionary war buff who has lived next door to the Babcocks' house forever. We kidded Josh about the hat for a bit and critiqued his spiel about the historic aspects of the place. Then we started talking about Everett.

"He'd have been impressed," said Josh, pushing back his top hat and putting his hands in his pockets.

"Yeah. Alma's sure caught the historic garden bug. I think maybe it's a little late for the house, but impressive, sure." Chad's never one hundred percent positive on anything. He'd find the Resurrection a few minutes early or just a little overproduced.

"Houses are machines for living," said Josh, who seemed set to argue period restoration, a topic of some interest in a town where neighbors can fall out over a modernization project or a new paint job.

Since I've heard Josh a dozen times on the subject if I've heard him

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once, I said, "I can't get used to the idea that Everett's gone. I still kind of expect to see him every time the Fourth meets."

"You were there when it happened, weren't you?" Josh asked.

"Yes. And the thing was, it wasn't any big, strenuous business."

"The Independence Day celebration," Chad said.

"That's right. All your Colonials were out. Fife and drum corps, too."

"Nice black powder firing display," added Josh.

"I remember thinking the Fourth should be part of it," I said, though, actually, that had been Everett's idea. Up here in New England, the Revolutionary period takes pride of place. He thought we ought at least to set up a Civil War encampment, show the regimental flag, so to speak. There hadn't been anything elaborate planned until the Carolina guys arrived. I forget whose friends they were. They were attending some conference, and they said they'd set a breastwork and we could mount a charge. Said we'd owe them a visit. "It was all pretty spontaneous and lighthearted."

"I'm surprised Everett agreed to that," said Chad. "Everett was always seriously authentic. A great guy, but a bit of a control freak. What do you suppose they called that in the old days?"

"Everett would have known," I said. I missed him, dammit. The rest of the guys in the Fourth are young and getting younger. I'm pretty fit, but I must confess there are days when I'd just as soon sit in camp as rush around with a pack and a rifle. And then Everett, as I say, had a sense of the poetry of the thing, of the way it could make time slip so that you momentarily entered another life.

I think he lived for those convincing moments when time rushes backwards and catches you up. Some guys, it's the soldiering they like; the saluting, the drills, the handling of old weapons. With Everett, now, it was the whole atmosphere, and thinking about it, the attempt to run gas lights made a kind of sense for him.

"It was hot that day," Josh remarked. "But nothing exceptional."

"Why we figured to keep it low key," I said. "And it happened so fast. We get the drum roll, discharge our little artillery piece, and take off yelling. Everett gets maybe fifty yards and goes down. Didn't think much of it."

"There have to be some casualties in a charge," Chad agreed.

"All he had a chance to say was, 'Alma'."

"I heard him myself," Josh added.

"Yes," I said, though that anguished cry had surprised me. Well, every marriage is an iceberg, isn't it, with most of the important things below the water line? Chilly as the Babcock marriage had always seemed, Everett's dying cry must have meant a lot to Alma, who ran onto the field and bent over him.

A bad, shocking moment. By the time Dr. Hale reached the scene, Alma, hysterical, had flung herself down onto Everett's supine body. "His heart just went," said Chad.

"Yep, though he'd always seemed so healthy."

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"He'd had a few warnings," Chad said, and Josh agreed that Alma had mentioned some earlier episodes.

"That's right; one pretty bad." As their neighbor, Chad was the expert and not much passed him by. "I had to take him to the doctor, because Alma was down with some stomach flu. They did all the tests and never found anything. Kind of odd, given his symptoms. He used to get dizzy; he'd feel nauseous and weak, but in between, he was fine."

"Listen, doctors don't always know," said Josh, who's a connoisseur of complications and disasters. "Give docs anything out of the ordinary and half the time they're stumped. They look for what they know."

"Heart problems aren't exactly rare." I sure wouldn't like to think that Burt Weston, who was Everett's doc and has treated me for years, would miss any serious heart malfunction.

"He sat at a desk all week. He probably shouldn't have been out running in the heat," said Chad.

Josh agreed. He looked a bit hot and uncomfortable in his Victorian rig, but smug too. Survival makes us smug and then it makes us foolish, for we start to hope we'll be the exception.

From the side of the house, Madeline began gesturing. "Well, boys, I'm summoned. I've promised to see the rest of the garden."

I went down and took Madeline's arm, though I was beginning to feel vaguely glum among the hoop skirts and top hats and the high Victorian flower beds, all things I usually enjoy. Everett's death almost a year ago was suddenly fresh in my mind.

"There's some less formal plantings behind that fence," said Madeline. "I think that was Alma's original garden—the one Everett disliked. That's more like what I have in mind."

I wasn't going to get into Everett's taste in gardens, which, I suspected, would lead into the Babcock marriage and other topics I'd as soon leave alone. A certain amount of ignorance is valuable in preserving friendship.

"I thought I'd never get your attention," Madeline said. "What were you and John and Chad talking about?"

"Everett, actually."

"Everett seems to be on everyone's mind today. Patty—she works at the service station—was just saying how sudden it all was. Said it hadn't really struck her until today that he was buried and gone. He never missed one of these historical society things."

That was pretty much what John and Chad had said, but I just nodded; perhaps period gardens bring on thoughts of mortality. Or maybe it was Madeline's reference to Everett's burial. Alma had been dead-set for cremation, but the instructions were in his will and with his lawyer. Not a good scene.

At the back of the yard were some nice rhododendrons and azaleas, planted to extend the lilacs which had long screened the drive from the house.

"I hope she has better luck with the deer than we've had," Madeline

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said, and I remembered several expensive hybrids nibbled right to their stems.

Behind the hedge was a picket fence and a brick path along a pretty, informal perennial bed. A small greenhouse of Victorian inspiration stood halfway between the house and the street, with a selection of ornamentals summering out front in big pots.

"Oh, isn't this nice," exclaimed Madeline.

"Yes," I agreed. "Those are foxgloves, right?"

"Yes, digitalis, going by now. And monkshood, goats beard, geraniums, sedums—I'll bet that's Autumn Joy—and some meadow sweet. Very nice."

"What's this in the jardinières?"

"Big ones are oleanders. I'm not sure about this vine," Madeline said, bending down to examine the leaves.

"Don't touch that." It was Alma.

We'd been so taken with the greenhouse and the plants that we hadn't heard the rustle of her black silk dress. Like the garden, the dress was maybe a tad late for the house but impressive. She had her dark hair turned up, too, like a Victorian widow. She'd been wearing just that dress and carrying just that parasol on the day of the fatal encampment. I remembered because I went out to help and wound up carrying Everett's rifle, knapsack and canteen, and her lavender parasol.

"I'm sorry," said Madeline. "I was just trying to figure out what it is."

"Oh, Madeline, it's you! Hello." Alma's severe expression relaxed. "I didn't know you were here. A fellow gardener's a different story—people have been tramping absolutely everywhere—but still, don't touch. That's a datura, a lovely vine, but highly irritating. More: quite poisonous. No children, no pets allowed. Not that I have to worry about that."

She gave a little, bitter laugh. The Babcocks had never had any children together, though Everett had a son and daughter by a previous marriage. I knew that, although they were never officially mentioned.

"I was going to beg a slip," said Madeline, "but with the grandkids I'd better not."

"Sacrifices to beauty," Alma remarked. "So many lovely things are poisonous. Oleanders now." She touched one of the pink flowering plants. "The trees used to poison French troops in Algeria. There's a historical detail for you," she told me. "The soldiers would make shelters of oleander and burn the wood, and the smoke poisoned them. Even the perfume is dangerous in quantity."

There was something in her voice. Languid was the word that came to mind. A good Victorian word. And something else I had trouble placing. It struck me that Alma, whose features are strong, rather than pretty, looked striking in black, that Victorian weeds suited her looks and gave her a touch of poetry. I suddenly knew that's what Everett had required.

"I do like this." Madeline gestured toward the perennial border.

"Quite inauthentic," said Alma. "Everett wanted it out. It's a wonder he kept me, but I guess there aren't any Victorians left." She laughed to show

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that this was a joke. "The rhodies were a compromise. A Victorian shrubbery to hide my hardy border."

"I suppose even the Victorians kept some older plants," Madeline said. "Waste not, want not."

Alma gave a thin smile. "Depend on it."

"Their medicines were mostly botanicals, weren't they?" I asked.

"Digitalis was still used until recently, I think." She spoke indifferently.

"Foxglove, yes, that's right," said Madeline. "For heart cases."

I could not help a glance at the vigorous stand in the border.

"A staple in cottage gardens," Alma remarked. "Not fashionable, though. Not bright enough. Bedding plants were the thing. More expensive, a little bit nouveau riche and vulgar." She spoke with a certain contempt, and I wondered why she'd put in that elaborate high Victorian garden. Was it a memorial to Everett?

"A shame to give up monkshood, though," remarked Madeline, "even if it is toxic." That was news to me.

"Such a pretty blue, monkshood," agreed Alma, and she reached out and plucked one of the tiny blossoms.

I had a sudden flash of memory, of seeing something vivid blue against her black dress, but like a name that stays resolutely on the tip of one's tongue. I couldn't recall its significance. "I remember that Everett was interested in herbals. I'm surprised he wanted to dig up this medicinal border."

"Everett wanted to turn back time, and he was willing to make sacrifices," said Alma. "Would I have been next, do you think?"

There was an awkward silence.

"You were his oldest friend," she said to me. "One of his few real friends."

I hadn't realized that—Everett's personality had discouraged confidences, but I knew something was required. "He always said you'd be the perfect wife if you liked reenactments more. That's what he said."

"Did he?" I could not read her face.

"Yes."

"The trouble with reenactments for me," she said thoughtfully, "is that we know too much. We know how it all comes out. That's what Everett liked. He liked knowing the results beforehand. No suspense; the battle lost or won before you set out; the march long or short; everything frozen. I prefer—a certain indefinite quality."

"Surely the flowers were a harmless anachronism," said Madeline, who has an acute detector for any unpleasantness and always seeks to head off conflict.

But the memory that had refused me before now seemed on the verge of discovery. "As I recall . . ."

"What?" There was something sharp in Alma's voice.

"He compromised enough to use some of your perennials. He swore by a liniment you'd concocted. Isn't that right?"

"Mostly witch hazel," she said.

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"And something for his stomach too. I think he took some at the Fourth of July encampment."

"Hardtack and beans are a threat to anyone's stomach," she said quickly. "I always warned him that reenactment suppers would ruin his digestion."

"He had a little bottle," I said, and even as I spoke I knew I should have kept my mouth shut. "Blue glass, wasn't it? Authentic nineteenth century. Didn't that have some medicinal potion?" I was sure of it. And where had that bottle gone? I remembered now that it hadn't been in his knapsack when I returned his kit.

"I hardly remember anything of that terrible day!"

Madeline gave me a reproachful look. "Such a shame. Such a shock. And all so sudden."

"But as he'd have wished, don't you think?" Alma turned to me.

"Perhaps not at fifty-five," I said, for I was seeing Alma, always so cool and in control, clutching Everett's lifeless body and something blue, something blue in her hand.

She shook her head. "I meant in the nineteenth century. He died as he lived—in the past."

Before I could answer, Madeline took my arm. "Alma's had visitors all day," she said. "Answering questions, wearing that dress and corset! Lovely, but I'll bet it's hot." My wife rattled on, and Alma took out a handkerchief and wiped her eyes.

"I didn't realize what a strain this would be."

"Of course," said Madeline. "Of course you didn't. Probably the historical society shouldn't have asked, but your garden is such a highlight, they wanted it included. They were probably afraid you'd feel bad if you weren't invited."

"I need something to drink." Alma spoke abruptly, and a little rudely, I thought, when Madeline was trying to console her. "Won't you join me?"

I had misgivings, though I knew it would be awkward to decline, but Madeline exclaimed, "Oh, that would be lovely. I'm parched, aren't you?"

I shook my head, but it was too late.

"I know just the thing," said Alma, and led us inside. She went into the pantry and we heard the icebox door open and close and a rustling in the cupboard. I couldn't meet Madeline's eyes. I was thinking over disagreeable ideas and marveling at how one can be trapped by courtesy.

Alma came out a few minutes later with three glasses of a spiced fruit concoction doctored with vodka. There was an intense raspberry puree in there somewhere and the glasses were cold and tall and deep purple. A mourning drink, I thought to myself, and before I could hesitate, I knocked my glass over. Bright purple spilled over the doily on the tray and splashed onto Madeline's dress and my shirt front.

A flurry of apologies. Alma and my wife both jumped up for paper towels. I moved around to help and then, when Alma said she'd replace the glass, I said, "I'm not so thirsty. Madeline and I will share this one."

I picked up the glass Alma had set out for herself and took a deep

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drink, then passed it to Madeline. "Quite delicious," I said.

"Madeline can have the other glass." Alma's eyes were chilly. "I can make up one for myself."

But there she had over-reached. My wife hates to put people out. "Oh, don't bother, this will be fine. "It's rich, isn't it? Really a drink to sip." And so on.

I had her out the door as soon as we could decently go.

"I'm sorry about your dress," I said in the car. "The glass slipped right out of my hand."

"Cold water will fix it," she said. "Your shirt, too, and Alma's doily. She had no reason to take on about it."

When I got upstairs, I got a pair of nail scissors and cut a patch well soaked with juice and put it in a Ziploc baggie. I was thinking of the state Forensic Science Laboratory, though as soon as I'd ruined the shirt, I had a notion to forget the whole thing. One can be so sure of something at one moment and thoroughly doubtful the next.

But Monday morning before I could decide anything, the news was all around town that Alma Babcock had been found dead by her cleaning lady.

Chad stopped by with the details, and Madeline made coffee and said over and over that it was the strain of the day. It was only when Chad was gone that she said, "You knew."

I feigned ignorance, still unsure what I planned to do.

"I found the shirt," said Madeline.

"I suspected. She obviously picked up the medicine bottle when Everett collapsed that day. One reason for her hysterics."

"I shouldn't like to think that," said Madeline.

"Everett should be exhumed."

"No," said Madeline. "That won't do any good for anyone. Leave it alone. He died of a heart attack."

"I suppose Alma died of grief?" I couldn't help being sarcastic.

"Like a proper Victorian widow," said my wife.

There was some discussion about this, as you can imagine, but at last that's how we left it, and it was a good thing, too, because when the pathologist's report was finished, the coroner announced that Alma Babcock had died of poison right enough, but administered, not via her vodka and raspberry drink, but by a large and handsome box of chocolates that Everett purchased for her just shortly before his death. She'd been on a diet at the time and had chosen to freeze the confections.

"Well, I never!" said Madeline. "Poor Alma. I feel guilty even thinking about that drink."

The clear implication was that I should be ashamed of myself. And I was, but I also remembered the little blue bottle and Alma's fears of being replaced and Everett's anguished cry, which, now that I think of it, had a good touch of surprise in it. Though like Madeline, I wouldn't like to think badly of a friend, it may be that the Babcocks were better matched than any of us suspected.

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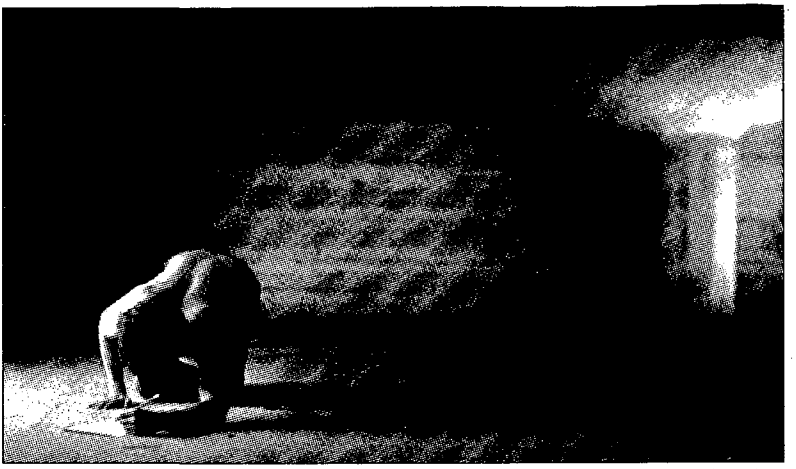
# MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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## Committed to Writing

We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "January/February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

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**The winning entry for the July/August Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 188.**



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# CHARLIE AND THE PIRATES

## GARY ALEXANDER

Call him Juan Gama. That's what he goes by. He isn't Latino, but he's dark, thanks to Syrian blood on his mother's side. He can pass, at least with a nosy gringo tourist like this Charlie dude at the next table.

"Campeche has an amazing history," Charlie Peashooter is saying, guidebook open beside his sweet roll and orange juice. "The only city in the Americas other than Cartagena, Colombia, to be walled to thwart pirates. You surely know that, señor. My apologies if I am boring you."

Juan smiles blankly and nods, holding to the image that English to him is a foreign language. They are in La Parroquia, an open-air cafe on Calle 55. Morning eggs and coffee here is a homey routine Juan has fallen into. He knows that routines and patterns can be deadly, but six months in Campeche has slackened him.

Located on the Yucatan Gulf Coast, Campeche City is the size of Tacoma and Shreveport. It is tropical and picturesque, and nobody goes there. Juan Gama guesstimates a maximum of five hundred foreign visitors are in town at any one time, and that includes the Eurogringo variety. If they've determined that he fled south of the border, they would be scouring hot spots like Acapulco and Cancún, where one can debauch in style.

Juan Gama just turned twenty-four. Although he is nearly naked in shorts and T-shirt, he still manages to appear rumpled. His rimless glasses are smudged and his wavy black hair has a mind of its own. He is lanky and a bit awkward, and has accumulated fifteen pounds, much of it around the midsection. He hasn't been so relaxed in years.

"Pirate," he replies, pretending to struggle with the word.

"I should say so," Charlie says, consulting his guidebook. "Listen to this. English, Dutch, and French pirates regularly plundered Campeche after its founding in the 1500s. On February 9, 1663, they combined forces and killed every man, woman, and child. After the attack, Spanish colonial authorities decided to wall the city. The project was completed over the following half century and eliminated the pirate menace. Any subsequent foray was driven off."



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Not every woman was killed, not if you believe Teresa, Juan's lady, who can get cuckoo on the subject. Teresa just *knows* that a female ancestor of hers survived, a beauty, ravaged by a pirate captain. She's conflicted because of her pirate blood and what they did to her forebears.

Juan continues nodding, smiling.

Charlie initiated the conversation and introduced himself. He has a decade on Juan Gama. Slim and muscular and tanned, natty in slacks and pullover, his teeth are straight and white. The part in his sandy hair is as precise as a laser beam.

His appearance is agreeable and post preppy, though his nose is too long and his features are too bunched to qualify him as Hollywood handsome. He smiles easily and his blue eyes never quite make contact. He is a baritone with perfect diction who wears heavy cologne.

Charlie has an aura of relentless congeniality. He looks to Juan like a game show host.

"Yes. Very hard times," Juan says, returning to his eggs.

"Indeed. The definition of piracy is more varied and complex these days. One dictionary defines it as unauthorized use of another's invention, production, or conception. They're referring primarily to copyright infringement. Those software companies are having fits, aren't they? Of course, the scope of piracy is even broader. For instance, the methodical manipulation of games of chance in three states. To the tune of two million dollars."

Juan Gama drops his fork and looks up.

Charlie Peashooter's smile is glorious. "Juan, you were thinking they would send a no-neck creature named Joe Knuckles?"

Juan Gama is genuinely speechless.

"Relax. That was the old way, in the old days. Please, finish your meal. Then we'll talk."

"I am a consultant," Charlie explains as they stroll the *malecon*, the boulevard that skirts the Gulf of Mexico. "Understand this, Juan. I was sent to negotiate, to resolve this difficulty. I am a reasonable person. My employers are reasonable people. That is my context."

They are walking beneath a fiery cloudless sky. The water is a vivid and murky green, like lime sherbet. "How'd you find me?"

"I'll continue addressing you as Juan if you don't mind."

"I don't."

"You trained and operated a brigade of card counters on a scale heretofore unseen. You went on a whirlwind tour and made your money before the casinos realized what had happened. Were they frat rats from your college, old chums?"

"No. Dormies, some still in school," Juan says.

"Compensation?"

"Fifty percent, less airfare and meals and hotel rooms."

"Hit and run, you were. A veritable blitzkrieg. You trained and rotated

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them so fast they were long gone before their photos circulated. Your system was devastatingly simple and effective. Blackjack dealers who thought they'd seen everything never knew what hit them. Hats off to you, sir."

"Uh, thanks. But, like, how'd you find me?"

"Resources. Everybody passed the hat and brainstormed. Your whereabouts was a challenge, sir."

"Card counting isn't a crime, you know. Having an idea what cards are left in the shoe shifts the advantage from the house to the player, that's all."

"It's a question of ethics."

Juan Gama laughs out loud.

"Oh, I admit it's hypocritical, but that's how it is. Nonetheless, my people want their money."

Juan is on the verge of losing his breakfast. He pauses, takes a deep breath.

Charlie places a hand on his shoulder and smiles genially. "Juan, please do try to relax. It's going to be all right. Bugsy and Moe and Icepick Willie haven't inundated that environment for decades."

Juan inwardly flinches. "You said negotiate?"

"That I did. The folks who run casinos nowadays have corporate bloodlines. They are cut from the entertainment conglomerates and tribal hierarchies. They understand that broken kneecaps don't enhance the bottom line. They understand compromise, they understand business decisions."

Juan nods grimly.

"A fifty-fifty split netted you in the neighborhood of one million smackeroos. You obviously live conservatively. Nevertheless, we wouldn't expect you to have every last penny squirreled away."

"You're right."

"We've written off your kiddy cohorts. I'm authorized to leave you ten percent free and clear. You give us ninety percent of the one million and keep the change. Down here, you're set for life. They look at the swindle as tuition for the education you gave them. Whadduya say, guy?"

"Uh. Yeah. Okay."

"When?"

Juan gazes out at the water. "Well, like I don't have it in a suitcase under my bed."

Charlie chuckles. "Ah. Offshore banks?"

"Grand Cayman," Juan improvises.

"You were a statistics major before leaving academia without your degree, Juan. A brilliant albeit indifferent student. I'm pleased to be part of bringing peace of mind and stability to your life."

"I appreciate that, Charlie."

"When do you think?"

"Tomorrow maybe."

"Let's say tomorrow, *definitely*. Thanks to the miracle of electronics, we

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can do the transaction at the speed of light. All we require is the will. La Parroquia for breakfast. I'm buying." Charlie gives him a slip of paper. "This is a wire transfer number. You say it's done. I make a confirmation call. You live happily ever after."

"Okay."

Charlie gestures to the water. "Today's the ninth of February. Quite a coincidence."

"Huh?"

"The anniversary of the massacre, the ultimate plundering." Charlie swings his arm inland, to the land gate, a manmade stone monolith. The attaching walls on this side are long gone. They are standing on land filled in the 1950s. "We're at sea level. Before the fortifications, they simply moored and marched right in. No natural defenses. Tragic, tragic, tragic."

Juan thinks of Teresa's pirates. There must be a moral to Charlie's story, but he doesn't ask what it is.

"Translated, Juan Gama is Spanish for John Doe," Charlie says. "Simplistic, yes, but you do have an engaging, impish quality."

Juan replies by staring at his feet.

Charlie says, "Alas, we live in a grown-up world, Juan."

Charlie sits on the edge of his bed. It is early evening, and he is watching the darkening horizon and the sea that is growing livelier by the minute. Charlie is five floors high, perhaps directly above where the pirates tied up. This hotel was the place to stay in Campeche during the go-go oil boom era, the late seventies and early eighties. Now it's frayed, not entirely clean, and almost empty.

That's just hunky-dory with Charlie. He doesn't particularly like people and he enjoys the privacy.

He assembles his Colt .25 automatic, disassembles it, and repeats the process until the finest film of oil coats every moving surface. He wipes the excess and admires the machined creation that fits in the palm of his hand.

Smuggling the weapon into the country was *no problema*. Charlie's clients flew him to Monterrey by private jet. From there he went charter to here.

He goes to the window and holds a round up to the fading light. In his home workshop, Charlie hollows his store-bought hollowpoints until the lead walls are nearly translucent.

Nobody can operate at my proximity, he thinks proudly. Nobody. And he's right. Charlie's affability permits him point-blank range. Everybody likes Charlie. Not even the most paranoid assignment knows what hits him.

Cold steel against the ear. An instantaneous recognition of betrayal. One low-velocity shot, no louder than a handclap, the auditory canal serving as nature's silencer. A gurgle, eyeballs rolling up like blinds, then nothingness. No muss, no fuss.

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Medical examiners who have removed Charlie's slugs from brains of assignments he has turned into porridge comment that they resemble spiders. This is only one component in the legend of Charlie Peashooter, who uses a sissy gun and never misses.

Charlie slips the Colt into a pocket holster, mesmerized by what has become a spectacular display of lightning and howling wind and horizontal rain. Palm trees are bent like bows and there are whitecaps on the hotel's pool. He has never before been to the tropics and is amazed. The weather seems to be changing as fast as it does on the TV news where the talking haircuts speed up the satellite photos.

He worries about this Juan Gama assignment. His clients were so anxious that they dispatched him as soon as they isolated Juan and his breakfast ritual. Charlie hasn't the foggiest where Juan lives, though they did discover that he resides in the area with a woman named Teresa and her brother Perez.

Juan is a flighty young man who lacks graces. But he seems sensible. He should show tomorrow. After Juan Gama provides the magic number and the transaction is accomplished, Charlie will steer him someplace where he can complete his assignment. It isn't, after all, all about money. It's the principle of the thing.

Charlie shuts off the light. Early to bed, early to rise. That's his motto.

He stares at the flyspecked ceiling, again finding it peculiar that his clients often prioritize retribution above financial recovery. He puzzles over them as he does serial killers. He's never understood the breed. Why not kill for fun *and* profit?

He yawns, deciding that it takes all kinds.

Juan Gama stares at a ceiling that is not flyspecked. Teresa is an immaculate housekeeper.

"Your trouble, has it come for you?"

"Why do you say that?"

"How you were when you come home late from breakfast." Teresa hesitates. "How you are now, how you hold me after we make love tonight. You never hold me afterward."

Teresa is older than Juan. She is a kind, passionate woman with glossy black hair and trusting eyes. She has ample hips and comes up to his shoulders. She works as a travel agent at the hotels. Juan and she met on a day trip she led to the Maya ruin of Edzna. Juan was the odd man out in a group of French tourists.

Juan took her to dinner afterward. They ate broiled grouper and drank wine. They drank more wine and held hands. Teresa said he looked like he was lost. Not any longer, he said.

Teresa took Juan to her home in the old walled city. He has been there ever since, sharing the house with her worthless brother, Perez, who is

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Juan's age. Teresa is lover, mother, and best friend to him, all that and more.

The walled city is in the throes of urban renewal. Lining narrow streets of flat, smooth blocks are row upon row of one- and two-story dwellings with ornate doors, wrought-iron balconies, and pastel stucco. Those that aren't already spiffed up are getting the treatment, buckets of paint dangling from precarious bamboo scaffolding. The town's being daubed in every jelly bean color except licorice.

Teresa's is tangerine. Her front room is a mini museum. Descended from a longtime Campechano family—some great-great-greats of hers helped fight off the pirates, so she claims—she has old-timey portraits of them and bad dudes like Pegleg Pete and Blackbeard. In an armoire and mounted on a wall are a flintlock pistol, a cannonball, a blunderbuss, and a crossbow.

A gust from the storm has the wooden shutters clattering like drumsticks. Juan gets out of bed and secures them.

"I felt you were running from something, but you would never confide in me."

She is on her side, her back to him.

"I don't want to burden you," he says, not completely lying.

"You can, Juan."

"It'll be fine."

"Your name. Juan Gama. I know it is not real."

"Would you like my real—"

"No. I want to know you as I know you."

Juan Gama-John Doe, he thinks. He must have been out of his mind. Totally clueless. But he has gone through life treating life like a game.

He thinks she is asleep when she asks, "Have you seen Perez today?"

"No," he lies.

"I did not hear him come in. El Norte, this awful storm, I hope he is not caught in it."

Northers, the winter storms that occasionally blast through, the locals call them El Norte. "He'll be okay. He's a big boy."

"He is not a big boy, Juan. He is a child."

Juan pretends that he is dropping off.

"Sometimes, Juan, you remind me of Perez."

Juan does not drop off. He does not sleep a wink. He knows that as good a dude as Charlie seems to be, there are limits to his good nature.

If only I had money to give him, Juan laments.

Charlie Peashooter sips coffee at La Parroquia well past Juan Gama's breakfast time. He is disappointed in Juan, although not surprised. He cannot imagine greed clouding one's survival instincts, but that's human nature.

The storm has abated slightly. It is no longer curling eyelids inside out

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and raising tsunamis on mud puddles. It is not ideal flying weather. However, this is a blessing. Charlie overhears a taxi driver at the next table complaining to a waiter that nothing is landing at the airport because of high crosswinds and water on the runway.

The airport, Charlie thinks. On a hunch, he asks a waiter where Juan is and learns that Juan had told him that he was flying out of town this morning for a short trip.

Perez gazes out rain-streaked glass at the airstrip. A plane accelerates along the runway, its tires raising roostertails. It lifts off the ground just fine. His airliner from Mexico City could lift off just fine too to fly him to the capital on its return flight, but it isn't here. You can take off in this stuff, but you cannot land, so it has been diverted.

Perez doesn't understand flying, how you can go up but not down in foul weather. He orders another glass of whiskey from the bar. It would be just his luck if El Norte pours and blows for the three solid days. He feels at times like a big, black cloud hovers above him.

The gringo, his sister's boyfriend, who has never offered him a peso, had given him an airline ticket to cash in and meals and barhopping and a hotel room he had reserved in Mexico City. The gringo said he had business that was cancelled, so why waste the trip?

The gringo has no business that Perez knows of and has not gone anywhere since he moved into Teresa's bed, but Perez did not argue with him.

Perez drinks and he smiles. He suspects that Teresa is behind this. She wants her brother out of the way for a few days so she can be alone with the gringo and extract a marriage proposal. While Juan isn't a terrible fellow for an Anglo, Teresa seems to like him more than he likes her.

Whether Juan stays or he goes, Perez has no strong opinion. He is rich like any gringo is rich, but no big money has materialized until this travel gift. The home belongs to Perez also, and Teresa is a hard worker. Due to a combination of bad luck and bad bosses, Perez has had no success holding a job, but thanks to Teresa, there will always be beans and tortillas on the table.

"Are we in for forty days and forty nights of this? If you see a boat floating by loaded with animals, head for the hills."

Perez laughs at the corny joke by the gringo with the broken Spanish who is standing beside him.

"Of all the rotten luck," the gringo goes on. "My girlfriend is waiting at the Mexico City airport for me."

"Man, I know what you mean about bad luck," Perez says.

"Two weeks in Campeche on a consultancy assignment, she is as ready to see me as I am her. If you catch my drift."

Perez catches his drift. He is smiling broadly and winking. He is so suave

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and his voice is so perfect he should be a master of ceremonies on American television.

"You got my sympathy, man. I was going there on holiday. If you got money and I got money, you can find yourself a party anywhere."

The gringo sighs. "Too bad about our plane. My girl's sister is visiting us. She's your age and is hot as a firecracker."

Perez looks at him.

The gringo makes an hourglass gesture with his hands. Perez resumes observing airplanes spray water as they taxi. His last job was peddling wooden pirate ships on the street to tourists who did not want to buy them. Now that he finally has a wad of pesos in his wallet, the fates are depriving him of his fun.

The gringo snaps his fingers. "I have an idea. They say Mérida is clearing up. There must be outgoing flights. How far is it?"

Mérida, capital of Yucatán State, is an easy three-hour drive. Perez answers him and adds, "On account of the weather, it could take longer, but not much."

"I have a car, but I don't know the roads."

"I know the roads," Perez says.

"You'd be doing me a favor, taking the sister off my hands. You strike me as being capable of pulling that duty."

Another grin and wink. He is a nice, friendly man and they have a mutual problem.

"Why not?" Perez says. "What do I have to lose?"

Next day, Sunday, is as bright and hot as Juan Gama's mood is cool and gloomy. Teresa suggests that they take food and drink to the central plaza. There is a concert and big crowds. They can watch the people and listen to the music.

"You are troubled with the demons in your head and I worry about Perez. It will take our minds off these things," she says.

Juan shrugs. "He met a woman. That's all."

"He packed clothes before he went out yesterday and did not say a word to me."

"He's a grown man, Teresa."

"Only in years."

Juan lets it ride. Despite his offer to buy their food and drink from vendors, frugal Teresa packs bread, cheese, and sodas. For the eight blocks to the plaza, he carries their picnic sack in one hand and holds hers with his other. Since this is the end of him and her, this moment is incredibly bittersweet.

Juan is certain that Perez is in Mexico City, eating and drinking and living it up. When he stood Charlie up at La Parroquia, there were bound to be repercussions. Juan pictures Charlie beelining it to the airport to cajole Juan Gama's Mexico City itinerary from airline people.

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If Charlie knew where he lived, he'd have come for him at Teresa's, not the café. Juan estimates that he has a one-day window to escape. Today.

On a bench in the plaza, he looks at the people and the band. He sees and hears nothing. His thoughts wander to roulette, the purest of the casino games.

The wheel itself, rich inlaid wood, spinning on precision bearings, is a work of beauty. At rest or in motion, it is mesmerizing. No participation whatsoever is required of the player. You lay your money on the felt and the dealer rakes it off.

Juan Gama, a statistics major with a mathematical brain; of all people, he should have known better. He could not stop himself any more than a heroin addict could keep a needle out of his arm. Like one of those degenerate gamblers, he lost the card-counting proceeds almost as fast as they came in.

He has enough money stashed for another year. Then what? He can worry about that then. Charlie is today's headache.

Easygoing Charlie, wouldn't he sympathize if Juan could convince him of his staggering roulette losses? What is that old saying? You're only a temporary custodian of the house's money. Wouldn't Charlie take back word to his bosses that they've had their money all along?

Yeah, right. And pigs can fly.

"Are you not feeling well?" Teresa asks.

"What?"

"You won't talk to me. You have been in a trance."

"Sorry."

She gets up. "Since you are not having any fun, I cannot have any either. Anyway, I am anxious to see if Perez is home."

Why not? Juan thinks, rising slowly. He puts his arm around her and, setting a slow pace, begins to tell her everything.

Charlie Peashooter is impressed. This little abode is as neat as a pin and the living room is like an antique store with a military theme, including a rogue's gallery of buccaneer and colonial potentate portraiture. The feminine touch is apparent, with doilies and the scent of waxes. The decorator presumably is the sister of that unfortunate lad with the drinking problem.

In order to gain access to the airport terminal's interior, Charlie had purchased a ticket to Cancún. When he did not see Juan, it was logical that he utilized someone in this misdirection play. Another element in the logic: Why would Juan blab to that waiter if he were skipping town? It had been easy enough to grease a ticket agent's palm to learn if a man named Perez had likewise purchased a ticket and to identify him.

Juan Gama's ill-gotten gains may not be in an offshore account, Charlie theorizes. Perhaps, he thinks, Juan is oldfashioned, preferring to squirrel it in a mattress. His guess is close. In a shoebox in a cubbyhole behind a closet,

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perhaps unbeknownst to the lady of the house, is a shoebox containing fifteen thousand dollars in greenbacks and pesos.

Juan is teasing him with petty cash. They *will* have their chitchat concerning that Grand Cayman numbered account.

Charlie peeks between curtains. The stinker, there he is, home early from their picnic. His pleasantly plump lady friend is red eyed, squeezing her hankie for all it's worth. Charlie steps out of the light.

"How could you do this to Perez?" a sniffling Teresa is saying not for the first time. "To make a hunting decoy of him."

"Hey, like he's having a ball," Juan says. "Charlie's looking for me, not Perez. Nothing will happen to him."

"Something already has. I can feel it. How could you lie to me for these months?"

"I wasn't lying. I, uh, withheld. I was planning to tell you everything soon."

"Liar. When are you leaving me?"

"I have to go right away. I'll be back as soon as I can. I promise."

"Liar. What do I smell?"

They are inside. Juan is about to close the door, but he freezes. He smells it too.

"A man's perfume. You do not wear any."

"I do," Charlie says, stepping out of a shadow. "Forgive me. The door was unlocked."

"Liar," Teresa says, backing into Juan.

Juan steps protectively in front of her. "Charlie, I need an extra day or two."

Charlie sighs and exhibits a compassionate frown. "Juan, Juan, Juan. You should have been upfront. That hurts. I'd have worked with you."

Juan hangs his head.

Teresa demands, "Where is my brother?"

"A fine young man. Dissipating himself in Mexico City, I'll betcha. Oops, sorry, sis," Charlie replies with a wink.

"Liar. Liars. Both of you."

Charlie looks at Juan, his eyes widening playfully. "Well, I know where the term 'Mexican spitfire' originates, you lucky dog. Juan, now, this situation of ours?"

"One more day, Charlie. There's a mix-up on the account numbers—"

"You stop lying to him, maybe he will stop lying to me."

"Excuse me?" Charlie says to her.

Teresa looks at Charlie and his dead, but cordial, eyes. She has no expectation of prizes behind curtains.

"There is not any money except for what this man hides in my house he thinks I do not know about. Answer me where my brother is and you can take that money and go."

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"No money?" Charlie says to him. "There *has* to be money."

"There is. Honestly, Charlie, there is."

Juan says "honestly" as car dealers in TV commercials do. Charlie realizes now that there is no money. An unsatisfactory development, yes, but the denouement will be the same.

He sidles to Juan, pats his arm, and says, "Money. If you say so. Splendid. Heck, we should go out to a telephone right now and resolve this. Let's get it out of our hair, okay?"

Juan's feet won't move.

Charlie gives him a winning smile and a nudge that is more than a nudge. "C'mon, big guy, one call does it all."

"No," Teresa says in a hoarse whisper.

But she is not speaking from where she was, behind Juan's slumped shoulders. She has shifted to the hallway shadows. Charlie may have to do her also. Three assignments for the price of one. Life is so unfair.

He has already edged Juan outside. Hand firmly clamped to a wrist of his prey, Charlie reenters. He blinks, eyes adjusting to the darkness, and turns toward Teresa, igniting his smile. He glances at the wall with the pirate memorabilia. Something is missing.

Charlie reaches into his pocket when it dawns on him what it is. He reaches too late. The arrow pierces his throat as he draws his pistol.

"We drove your kind away once. We can do it again," Teresa says.

She is not talking to Charlie Peashooter, who is on the floor and cannot hear her. She is talking to Juan, who stumbles out the door and breaks into a run as she reloads the crossbow.

## HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

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# DYING WORDS

## ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER

For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 59.
The solution to the puzzle will appear in the March issue.

| DEFINITIONS | WORDS |
|---|---|
| A. "The windborne, — soul" (Arnold) | 51 90 65 149 4 206 101 179 62 |
| B. Home of "The Bustle in the House" poet | 80 56 117 13 186 145 191 |
| C. Bane of the four hundred | 141 108 36 132 148 138 5 210 |
| D. Property purchase, perhaps | 15 29 43 94 196 63 181 160 152 127 |
| E. NASA events | 169 11 202 114 157 41 187 119 |
| F. In a far from senescent way | 115 165 67 121 130 168 84 42 209 150 |
| G. Clamors | 173 1 113 45 131 22 |
| H. "— through a fleecy cloud" (Milton) | 86 158 46 50 23 142 126 31 |
| I. Doctrines | 129 182 111 200 33 171 |
| J. Largeness | 180 79 83 156 38 116 185 109 95 |
| K. Collegiate span | 91 147 57 110 82 6 208 25 |
| L. Brown, et al.; 2 wds. | 60 143 97 34 3 70 174 205 194 |
| M. "Animal House" role | 153 136 105 193 163 |
| N. Bee activity | 124 73 30 112 199 18 172 2 59 |
| O. Diaphragm-contraction outcomes | 74 125 92 100 201 177 68 32 14 |
| P. Gnat, e. g. | 134 16 198 167 203 58 99 189 24 |



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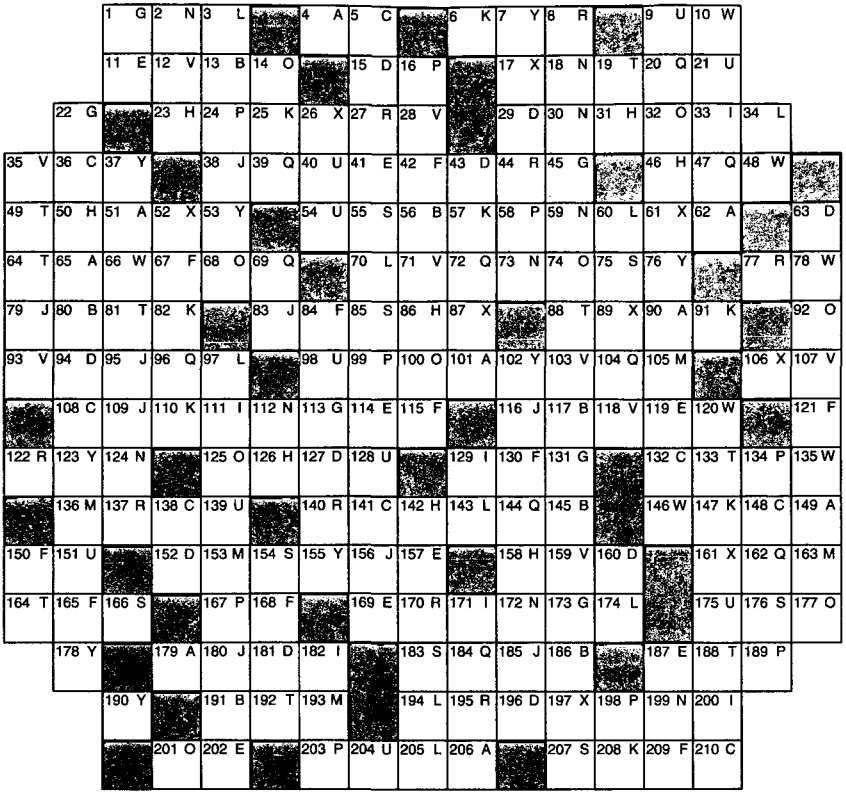


**Q.** Solar or lunar eclipse

96 69 162 39 72 20 144 104 184 47

**R.** Glam rocker's application: 2 wds.

44 27 8 195 137 122 140 170 77 ___

**S.** George Washington, at one point

207 55 166 154 75 183 176 85

**T.** Poe contemporary

192 188 49 88 64 19 164 81 133

**U.** Abidjan locale: 2 wds.

98 40 128 54 175 9 204 21 151 139

**V.** Pier denizens

107 35 28 159 118 93 12 103 71

**W.** State employee

120 135 66 78 146 48 10

**X.** Ocher or russet: 2 wds.

197 52 26 161 89 17 106 61 87

**Z.** Censure

178 37 123 76 155 7 190 53 102

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# SANTA BABY

## MELODIE CAMPBELL

Santa got whacked sometime after midnight on the night before Christmas. Not a creature was stirring on most of the mountain, but 'twas a different story on Country Club Drive. Someone with a grudge and a killer swing had smashed a fireplace poker over Santa's head.

I stumbled over the body with my morning coffee. It was dead cold in the living room. I shivered violently and sat down to think. Snow had fallen overnight and morning light cascaded through the French doors, highlighting the victim on the floor. I checked to see if the doors were locked, then I climbed the circular stairs to the master bedroom and woke Maryanne.

"Wake up, honey," I said quietly, patting her shoulder. She was all sleepy eyed as she murmured "Merry Christmas" to me. I couldn't help but think of all those other Christmas mornings long ago, when we had both raced down the stairs to be first to the tree.

I sat on the edge of the ivory duvet and stroked her arm. "Something bad happened, Maryanne, and you're going to have to be brave." She sat up suddenly and clutched my sleeve. I told her about the scene in the living room. Then I called the police.

When MacQuarrie arrived at the house with the uniform troops, he recognized me and grinned. He sent the troops to do SOCO work in the living room and followed me into the study.

"Hey, Red. Gotta name for the fat man on the floor? And don't tell me it's Nick."

My name isn't Red, and my hair isn't red, it's auburn. Like all the women in Legal Aid, I've had to put up with a lot of veiled chauvinism guised as kidding. And some not so veiled. MacQuarrie walks the line, and if I thought he were really serious, I'd shove his face down his throat. Instead, I call him Mac. And occasionally Big Mac, like the burger. Which is appropriate, as he's actually pretty yummy.

"Walter Mellon, my brother-in-law. Fifty-four. Hot-shot lawyer," I said. "Not a hacker like me. One of those financial wheeler-dealers in Toronto."

Mac groaned. "A whole load of suspects then. Who wouldn't want to whack 'im?" He ran a hand through thick brown hair. "The widow's your sister?"

"Yup. Maryanne Mellon. Forty-one, occupation is looking after her gorgeous self."



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Mac whistled. "Do I detect a little sarcasm?"

"Not really," I replied. "Just being honest. She got the looks and I got the, ah, career," I said carefully.

Mac plunked his butt down on the caramel leather couch and pulled out a pad. "You got the looks, too, Red. I'm going to start with you. You can put me in the picture; we're shorthanded today. Only us single guys on the beat."

"Fine by me," I said cheerfully.

"So, did you like the vic?"

"I used to call him Wally the Wanker."

Mac snorted. "Not number one on your hit parade?"

I shook my head. "Too full of himself, for my liking. But he was good to my sister."

Mac looked around. "You don't live here?"

I laughed. "Oh no. This is Walter's mansion; I'm just here for Christmas. I've got a small condo in Burlington."

Mac smiled. "So I got a chance after all . . ."

"There's a daughter from his first marriage," I said quickly. "Jessica. She's okay. Still in graduate school. Lives with a guy called Chase Sparrow, also in graduate school. They're coming here for dinner." Or maybe not, I thought grimly.

"Chase what? What the hell kinda name is that?"

I shrugged. It was going to be a long day with no turkey.

"Anyone else?"

"Not living here," I said. "Maryanne can tell you more."

"Let's bring that lovely lady in, shall we? Stay here, Counselor. I wouldn't want to get out of line." He leaned back into leather upholstery and grinned.

"I'll go call her," I said. I left the room and returned swiftly.

Maryanne entered the room—that's the only way to put it. Enter, stage left, enigmatic expression. Hesitate. Give a tentative smile. Mac was off the couch and on his feet in a flash.

"Mrs. Mellon, I'm very sorry for your loss. We are going to do everything possible to find your husband's killer."

"Oh." She sounded more bewildered than bereaved. "Thank you." Her voice was breathless, like a little girl's. I cringed.

"Can you think of any person who might have reason to want to kill your husband?"

"Oh," she said, widening her tearful blue eyes. "You see, there are so many, aren't there, Josie?" she appealed to me. "Wally was a really successful man, and there are lots of people who don't like that. They're jealous. You can't imagine."

My mouth flew open. No, he can't imagine because he's so darn unsuccessful. Holy cow, Maryanne, watch your tongue. I decided to take the lead. "You've heard of Merton Investments, Mac?"

"You mean the outfit on Bay Street that went bellyup a few weeks ago

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and left a whole lotta people without pensions?"

"That's the one," I said. "Walter Mellon was one of the principals."

"No shit," he said, writing furiously. "That's a lead and a half. The captain himself lost a bundle. Any threats made against him, Mrs. Mellon?"

Maryanne frowned. "I don't know. You could ask his secretary. I'll get her number." She stood up, went to the desk, and came back with a business card.

Something winkled and reflected in the light. As she swept by, I grabbed her wrist and gasped. "Maryanne! Where did you get that bracelet?"

"From Wally. For Christmas. He tried to hide it, but I found it in his desk drawer last night, and he let me have it early. I'm bad that way."

"You always were," I stammered.

"Isn't it stunning?" she said, swinging her wrist around so as to catch the light.

"What time was this, Mrs. Mellon?"

She looked up sharply. "About twelve thirty."

"So you can definitely state that Mr. Mellon was alive at twelve thirty last night?"

"Yes, definitely," Maryanne said firmly.

"Can you prove that he gave you that bracelet last night, and not some other day, Mrs. Mellon? It might be important."

Maryanne stared at him and said, "Just a minute." When she left the room, I made my case. "It had to be last night, Mac. I've never seen it before, and Maryanne isn't the type to keep a thing like that under wraps. Not her."

Mac gazed at me like he was seeing right through me.

"I know she's your sister, and it's unfair to ask you," he said, "but was their relationship solid?"

I shrugged. "As far as I know. He wanted a trophy wife, and she loved playing the part. He was always giving her things. I think she was very happy." I continued softly. "Her first husband was an unfaithful rat. Broke her heart. Second time around, she wanted stability, you know? The money was a nice bonus."

His brown eyes met mine. "At first, I didn't think you liked her much. Now I'm changing my mind."

"She's not so bad," I said uncertainly. "She's just vulnerable. Needs looking after. I've always felt more like the older sister instead of the other way around."

Mac's eyes softened. "You really are a very nice person," he said.

Maryanne swept back into the room like an operatic diva. "Here it is," she said triumphantly. She had a small blue box in one hand and held out a card to Mac with the other.

He took it and read aloud:

*To Peach-buns,*
*Love you forever,*
*from Porky, your Santa*
*On Christmas, 2007*

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"Christ, it almost rhymes." Mac was choking back laughter.

I grabbed the note. "Porky? You called him Porky?"

"He was so good to me," Maryanne started to sniff. "I'm going to miss my Porky so much!" Then she started to sob in earnest. "Oh God, Josie—what am I going to do?"

I moved to put my arms around her. "Mac, maybe we should—"

"Sure, Red. I'll see how the others are coming along."

He left around noon. The rest of the team did what they had to do, and I sent Maryanne to lie down. The afternoon inched along.

I was in deep thought when Mac phoned later that evening.

"Hey." His voice was soft velvet. "What's happening over there now?"

"Nothing much," I replied. "The troops have gone. I've talked to the lawyer and the funeral hall. But I guess we can't plan a date yet."

"Any journalists call?"

"Oh God, Mac—I forgot about them," I said. "No. None so far."

"You tell me if they give you any trouble."

I smiled in the dark. The silence between us was comforting. "Why did you really phone?"

Mac sighed. "The weapon was wiped clean and the French doors were unlocked. That snowfall last night wiped out any footprints. Secretary confirms there've been lots of death threats. With the failure of Merton Investments, I got maybe eight hundred suspects." He paused. "Thought I'd let you know."

I let out my breath. "Thanks, Mac."

"Yeah yeah," he said carelessly. "I'm a prince in frog clothing." A pause. "Call you sometime, okay?"

"Okay," I replied softly. The phone went click.

A hundred memories fought for space in my mind. Two sisters, big and small, walking hand and hand. The first wedding, with Maryanne as goddess and me playing the part of gawky little sister. Maryanne waving and cheering as I walked upstage to receive my degree. One sobbing sister holding another at a funeral. Maryanne taking a baseball bat to the ex's car . . .

I walked into the two-story great room. Outside, snow continued to fall.

"Maryanne," I said slowly and deliberately. "About that note. When did Wally start calling you Peach-buns?"

Maryanne fingered a cigarette package on the coffee table. "He didn't," she said coldly. Her right hand lifted the package—Walter's package—and crushed it. "Who was she, do you think?"

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# A DREADFUL DAY

## Dan Warthman

To be sure, things are different in China. So I'm not completely surprised when, at five in the morning, Mrs. Zhu, using her key, bursts into my apartment and stands over my bed, talking a mile a minute, instructing me to rise and go with her. She circles the bed, inclining her head toward the window and casting her face skyward, then flattening her palms and spreading her fingers. I hear the words "American woman" and, I think, "headache."

I laugh because this is not the first time Mrs. Zhu's animated speech has left me bewildered.

Slow down, I tell her, you are speaking too fast. *"Mang, mang, Zhu Taitai. Ni shuo tai kuaile."*

*"Ni xuyao kuaile,"* she replies. You must hurry.

Mrs. Zhu, though typically not an excitable woman, can be sharp tongued and adamant. Particularly when she has something specific to communicate.

You must, she frequently insists, improve your Chinese. I think my Chinese is pretty good—survival plus—for one who has never studied formally and has been living in China for just over a year. But she finds my dependence on the dictionary exasperating.

She is fifty-five, small, fit in the soft way of one whose primary exercise, like many Chinese of her age, is slapping her thighs, rubbing her kidneys, and swinging her arms while rotating her upper body from side to side. Her hair is dyed jet black, of course—someone once said that the Chinese dye to the death—and shows no sign of gray. Her eyebrows are tattoos, a thin dusky arc of aging charcoal that, for as long as I've known her, she has been threatening to rejuvenate.

I lift my head off the pillow, sit up, rub my eyes.

"He Laoshi!" Her tone is clipped, harsh. "You must do as I say this time."

She calls me Teacher He. My Chinese name is *He Ning,* a simple step from my English name, Mike Henning. *He* has a funny sound, nothing like the English pronoun—more like a short *e* crossed with a short *a*. *Ning* means repose, serenity, peace. Mrs. Zhu uses the title *laoshi* to show respect, because I teach English to Chinese adults. At least, I usually do, but at the moment I am out of work because the English school where I had been employed since arriving in China closed. The surge in interest for learning English has brought bigger, flashier schools to Beijing. My tiny



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employer, reluctant or unable to finance improvement, went out of business a month ago.

"I always do what you say," I reply, only half joking.

She opens my wardrobe and fishes out pants and shirt, which she places on the foot of my bed. I wave her out of the room so that I can dress.

"You must hurry," she demands, turning her back and stepping toward the door but refusing to leave the room completely.

I pull on the pants, button the shirt, and excuse myself to go to the bathroom to toss a little water on my face and brush my teeth. But she seizes my arm and redirects me toward the door. She leans over and straightens my shoes, which I slipped my feet into, and off we go.

Descending the three flights of steps, Mrs. Zhu grips the rail with one hand and my wrist with the other. She cuts across the lobby, along a short hallway, and out the back door.

The sky is a dim, hazy yellow, not from the imminence of morning, but from the dull glow of the city dispersed by pollution. Night's chill hangs in the air. Ten meters from the door, close to the building, a small crowd of a dozen or so has gathered, agitated and yammering in loud angry voices. I recognize most of them by sight, my neighbors, other inhabitants of the apartment complex. As we approach, they fall silent and step back, allowing Mrs. Zhu, leading me like a pack animal, to thread among them.

On the ground lies a woman—supine, clad in gray cargo shorts and a light blue cotton blouse—wrenched oddly at the waist, one arm obviously dislocated at the shoulder, her right leg bent in an unsettling fashion at the knee.

I recoil, stunned, needing a minute to process what I am seeing, but Mrs. Zhu squats close to the woman's face and, still clinging to my wrist, tugs me down next to her. Someone from behind shines a flashlight, and the scene clarifies into a gruesome tableau.

The woman has curly black hair, thin lips painted a deep, dark red, wide-open eyes staring at nothing. One cheek is smudged with dirt, and I can see from the disturbance in the spotty grass that her body has been moved, as if she had—or had been—rolled over after hitting the ground. I stand up, eager to move, to separate myself.

*"Aiya,"* I exclaim, the typical interjection of surprise and awe and wonder.

*"Shenme?"* asks Mrs. Zhu. What?

*"Bu shenme!"* No what, I say, and point with both hands at the woman. Merely her presence is enough what.

"Do you know this woman?"

The dead woman is white. But almost a quarter million foreigners live in Beijing, and lots of them are white. I say that I don't know her, and the crowd resumes its mad chatter.

An old man, a grim fellow I see often around the complex, ungently nudges the dead woman's shoulder with the toe of his soft shoe, jiggles it, as if trying to wake her from a deep sleep.

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"Don't touch her," I say.

The man snorts and mutters something unintelligible.

I flap my arms helplessly, not knowing how to say crime scene or to make clear that the police will be able to deduce significant information from the position of the body. As if these people don't already know all this.

My actions, however they are interpreted, provoke a small barrage of restrained hostility, generally aimed toward foreigners, some toward Mrs. Zhu. Most of the residents or their families have been right here for thirty or more years, from the days when this was a work unit. I'm the first foreigner to live among them, and this is obviously a foreign evil come to torment them. Mrs. Zhu is taking the heat because she's the one who rents the apartment to me.

But also, thanks to her massive *guanxi*—influence and connections (which is why she is able to get away with renting to me in the first place)—she is a leader among them. For thirty years, until her retirement five years ago, Mrs. Zhu held the prominent position of head clerk in the district police station, a position of considerable power in the neighborhood.

She is unfazed by the crowd's resentment.

"We must return this girl to the place where she belongs." She flurries her hands, like shooing a pesky fly.

"The girl belongs in America," grunts the old man who had touched the body with his foot.

"She does not belong in China," says another, glancing at me.

Everyone nods.

Despite the rancor, I assume their intentions are respectful, that they mean to call the police, who will establish the woman's identity, notify her embassy, and ultimately get the body in the right hands, so that she can be returned to her family, wherever they are. I don't know for sure that she's an American. Only that she is white, early twenties, I'm guessing, maybe a college student on a year abroad, though she could be a tourist . . . who knows?

From the evident injuries to her shoulder and leg, I conclude that she fell. The building, the southernmost of three around a courtyard, is seven stories tall. I look up and see the blurry outlines of three heads leaning out from the porch on the top floor.

"Perhaps those people saw what happened." I start to point, but Mrs. Zhu dusts my hand back to my side.

"No," she says firmly. "They saw nothing."

Though her response seems odd, I have no time to react.

Because the next development is mind boggling. Mrs. Zhu takes charge, issuing commands and directions. Four of the men hoist the woman's body by the hands and feet, causing the dislocated shoulder and the twisted knee to move in ways so unnatural that I have to look away. But that isn't the mind-boggling part.

They carry the woman inside the building, onto the elevator, up to the

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third floor, and into my apartment, which Mrs. Zhu opens for them using her key.

"Wait!" I shout in English, and then *"Ting, ting."* Stop, stop. No one listens. "What are you doing?" I ask frantically.

"We will keep her here until we know the right place for her," says Mrs. Zhu.

She instructs the men to put her on the floor in the corner of the living room. They place the body and release her limbs, which thump roughly on the floor. But then Mrs. Zhu has a better idea.

"Put her there," she says, pointing to the patio, which in my apartment is enclosed by large casement windows. "So that it won't smell in the apartment."

Two of the men lift the woman's arms and drag her across the living room. Mrs. Zhu bends and removes the sawed-off broomstick I use to jam the sliding door. I don't really worry about anyone scaling the outside wall and entering from the porch, but the makeshift lock makes me feel less vulnerable. Mrs. Zhu stands the bar in the door gutter and leans it against the frame. She slides the door open.

The dead woman's head bumps over the threshold, a wad of hair tangling on the metal strip and remaining there after they yank her loose. A trickle of blood has congealed in the corner of her mouth.

A woman, about the same age as Mrs. Zhu, carries in the dead woman's sandals and pocketbook and places them on my coffee table. This same woman rummages in my closets. Not finding what she wants, she removes the top sheet from my bed and drapes it over the corpse. One of the men tucks the edges under the body. Mrs. Zhu cranks open three of the windows, turns to me, pinches her nose.

*"Zhu taitai,* this . . . this woman can't stay here," I say, in a voice more shrill than effective. "The police—"

"No, no, He Laoshi," says Mrs. Zhu. "No police. No police." She brandishes her hand and shakes her head.

"What do you mean?" I screech. "Of course, police."

Someone laughs scornfully, and Mrs. Zhu turns and herds everyone out of the apartment.

"Later," she says, "when I know everything, then I will explain to the police."

I give her a pained look. "I can't keep this—"

"Not keep," she cuts me off, patting my arm with both of her hands. *"Aiya!"*

Mrs. Zhu opens the dead woman's pocket book and riffles through the contents. She finds no passport, but she does come up with a California driver's license.

"Oh," Mrs. Zhu says. "Not same."

The license identifies the dead woman as Anna Kaminsky, from San Francisco, twenty-nine years old, five feet seven inches tall, with blond hair and blue eyes, and the picture depicts a pale, unsmiling woman, with

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plain features and colorless hair and eyes. Mrs. Zhu goes to the body and retracts the sheet to look more closely.

"Same but . . ." Mrs. Zhu points to the woman's hair and then to her eyes. I have to get my dictionary to find the words for hair dye and contact lens. Mrs. Zhu puckers her lips and says, "Yes, of course, I see this."

Somehow, the dead woman looks . . . I hesitate to say more alive, but at least she looks more real than the woman in the picture. Maybe it's the contact lenses that give her dead eyes a vibrancy, the appearance of conscious preoccupation, as if her vision is riveted on something the rest of us can't see.

Mrs. Zhu clucks her lips and replaces the sheet over the woman's face.

"He Laoshi," she says, "go back to bed, sleep a while longer."

I am speechless, but it doesn't matter because she is down the hall and out the door before my brain produces a cogent response.

As different as things might be in China, they aren't this different. A dead body is a dead body, and this one is in my apartment. I imagine a dozen scenarios, but none make sense and none end happily. Indeed, already things have gone beyond the possibility of any logical explanation, should one become necessary.

I pace—living room, hallway, kitchen, bedroom, back along the hallway to the living room. After a few laps, convinced that I am smelling something, I inspect the living room floor where they first dropped the body to see if it's been contaminated. Though I see nothing, I douse a towel with laundry bleach and wipe the spot and then decide to scrub the entire path over which they had dragged her. I open the door to wash the threshold—which is when I see the small clump of hair stuck in the metal strip.

I have to strike a match and burn the hair away. The smell is bitter—bleach and singed human hair—and I leave the door open to freshen the air. But I feel certain the odor of the dead body will permeate my rooms. I close the door. Resume pacing.

The body is a magnet. Every time I pass the glass doors, my eyes snag on the familiar but incongruous sight of my bedsheet, its faded floral pattern, spread over the lumpy parcel. I discern the contours of the woman's body—head, facing up so that her nose and chin create two small bumps in the sheet, breasts, hips, feet, or one foot, because the other is bent to the side, or at least I assume it is, remembering the disarticulation of the right leg.

I experience a weird urge to remove the cover and look closely at the woman. Not pruriently. But I have never seen an unembalmed or undoctored cadaver. Plus, I begin to worry that we've all made a mistake. What if she isn't dead? I stare at the sheet to see if it moves, hoping it will move, hoping to see her chest rise and fall, hoping for a flutter in the fabric near her lips. Nothing.

I spin through the apartment, stopping at the window, gaping at the woman. Once or twice, I even step out onto the porch, intending to look, but each time, the aroma, whether real or illusory, activates my gag reflex,

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which in turn triggers a pronounced undulation of fear that overpowers my intellectual curiosity.

My agitation reaches fever pitch. I have to get out of here. Part of me thinks about packing my few possessions—clothes and toiletries, three or four paintings and photographs, a dozen or so books—into two suitcases and a backpack and vanishing to another part of the city, or fleeing China altogether since I'm currently unemployed anyhow. I know I can get another teaching job, but, aside from a preference for life in Beijing, there's nothing keeping me here.

Anxiety, bordering on panic, holds me. Because I don't know what my role exactly is in this situation. If I flee, will Mrs. Zhu, or the others, involve the police and blame me for this woman's death? Will I be tracked down?

All the while, the impulse to examine the body grows stronger, but on top of everything else, a sort of phobic aversion checks me.

I dial Mrs. Zhu's number and while it rings, I look at my watch and am surprised to note that it's only six o'clock. I feel like I've been pacing and fretting for several hours.

"He Laoshi, I am sleeping now," Mrs. Zhu says. "It is very early."

*"Zhu taitai,"* I plead, "you must remove this woman from my apartment."

"Yes, yes," she says. I can tell, though, that her answer has nothing to do with my emotional state.

"Yes, yes, no, no, but, but nothing . . ." I know that I sound out of control, which diminishes my *face,* which is always critical in China. Not that foreigners have much face to begin with.

"He Laoshi," Mrs. Zhu interrupts, "you should also be sleeping."

"How can I sleep?"

"You must close your eyes and concentrate," she instructs, as if I don't know how to sleep.

"I cannot sleep while this woman is here."

"Do not think about this woman."

*"Zhu taitai . . ."*

"You must try to sleep," she says obdurately. "I will come to you later."

"Thanks a lot," I say in English.

I decide to shower. Afterward, I get into a pair of boxer shorts and patrol the apartment while rubbing my hair dry with a towel.

And then, I am standing once again, gawking through the glass door at the sheet and asking myself out loud, "How did I get here, how can there be a dead woman on my patio beneath the sheet under which I have been sleeping every night?"

My thoughts reel into absurdity—the sheet already has my DNA on it and is now collecting the woman's DNA. Thinking that this woman and I are linked irrefutably. Wondering if even laundering will remove the evidence against me. Hitting on the phrase evidence against me. I have to do something.

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From my closet, I take out a clean sheet—actually, a brand-new sheet, still in the original package. I shove the door open, walk over to the woman, take a deep breath, snatch away the old cover, and fling it into the living room.

A volley of impressions assaults my senses. First, the scent is unmistakable, like a baby's soiled diaper. I know what this means, and cover my nose with my hand. Also, the woman's color is unexpected, an ashen and pasty gray, so that her makeup delineates a macabre mask—dark lipstick seeming nearly black, eyes rimmed and shadowed in gloomy shades of indigo and carmine, eyeballs like bubbles trying to escape into the air.

There is nothing restful about the woman's body. Everything is awry, from her clothing, bunched awkwardly around her torso, to her dislodged shoulder, protruding almost bladelike from its socket, to her disjointed knee.

My eyes land on the pockets of her pants. Why hadn't I—or someone—thought of them earlier?

Kneeling, I very tentatively reach out, and, as my hand makes contact with the woman's clothing, I cringe. A mix of aversion and horror. Expecting I don't know what. A convulsion. A susurrated release of the vapors of putrefaction. A spasmodic discharge of electrical current. To be hurled backward. Driven by unconquerable disgust from the scene.

Instead, I trace the stiff cotton cloth and beneath it the bulging contents of the large cargo pocket. Cylinders, like fat pill bottles, and rectangular packets, which I take to be cigarettes. Both pockets, crammed full. Surely something revealing, something that will help locate this woman's place, that will establish, as Mrs. Zhu had said, where she belongs.

I force my fingers to investigate, pulling open the first pocket flap, the velcro ripping loose like the night screech of a cat.

Money. Rolls and folds of money. Mostly U.S. dollars, a handful of loose Chinese *Renminbi*. I remove the elastic band encircling one roll and count ten one-hundred-dollar bills. One rectangular packet holds double that, twenty hundreds.

I don't bother estimating the total, not right then. Too anxious. I grab the new sheet I had fetched to cover the body, smooth it on the floor, and wrap the money in it. Scooping up everything, sprint down the hall and drop the bundle on the bed. The image of Mrs. Zhu coming through the door stops me. I race back to the living room, find my backpack, return to the bedroom, and stuff the money inside. Close the zipper, and set the bag on the floor next to a small wooden cabinet I use for miscellaneous supplies.

Re-entering the living room, an overwhelming gust of fetid odor fills my nostrils. Stepping onto the porch once more, I flick the door closed behind me—casually, unthinking, as I've done a thousand times—hoping to prevent the smell from suffusing the entire apartment.

The stick I use to secure the door—by placing it flat in the track between the door and the jamb—is standing where Mrs. Zhu left it, propped at an

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angle against the edge. For some reason, probably the vibration, perhaps the spontaneous vigor of my action, the shudder from the door's slamming—whatever, the stick flops down. Wedges itself into the locked position. Making it impossible for me to open the door from the outside, impossible to get back into the apartment. I hear it fall, a distinct thunk.

I am trapped on the patio. In my undershorts. With a dead woman, who is no longer covered.

The day is overcast, but sweltering. Even with the windows open, the temperature on the patio must be ninety by midafternoon. It feels like nine hundred. The air is motionless.

It's like being in a room with one of those pictures about which it is said, the eyes follow you everywhere. The woman's body stirs, repositions itself, though always returns to exactly the same place. Her eyes blink, look directly at me. She takes deep breaths, holds them. Her lips move—smile slightly, grimace, part and close, grow taut, rubbery, parched. Her fingers twitch, her foot trembles. She whispers my name.

Throughout the day, I hear the voices and footsteps of people passing outside. I peek over the low patio wall and see my neighbors, some who had been among the crowd earlier that morning, even two of the people who had helped deliver the body to my apartment. I am desperate to call out, to ask them to phone Mrs. Zhu, but I know the effort will result in another symposium in my apartment, at which I would be as much the object of discussion as the woman.

So, I wait. At first, patient, then uneasy, then apprehensive, horrified, then bilious, feverish, delirious. Several times I think I hear knocking on my apartment door. I put my ear to the glass, but I can't be sure.

Eleven hours. As close as I can tell. Estimating that I got locked out around seven in the morning, and Mrs. Zhu doesn't come to check on me until a almost six in the evening. Arriving only moments before I cross into total insanity. She chuckles, recognizing instantly what happened.

"He Laoshi, *weishenme?*" Why? She points to the bedsheet on the floor of the living room where I had tossed it.

She helps me inside and gives me a glass of warm water, but allows me only small sips. I point to the air conditioner hanging from the wall, but she refuses to turn it on. I am too feeble to argue. Mrs. Zhu finds a magazine and fans me with it, feeding me sips of water, speaking words I don't bother trying to follow.

My strength returns quickly, and her erratic thrashing at the air starts to annoy me. I take the magazine and thank her. She picks up the sheet, takes it to the porch.

Like me, though, she notices the pockets, but, unlike me, she has no trouble snaking her hands into each one, even hoisting the woman's rump, though the body is rigid and moves like board, to feel inside the back

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pockets, from which she retrieves two more flat packs of cash and a small scrap of paper.

*"Meijing,"* she says. Meaning U.S. dollars. She puts the cash in her pocket and then, shaking her head, puzzles over the piece of paper.

*"Bu zhidou,"* she says. I don't know. She hands me the piece of paper.

After a long delay, my brain adjusting to cogent thought, I recognize the scribbling on the paper as Cyrillic, which, needless to say, I can't read. I tell Mrs. Zhu it's Russian, and she tells me that she knows it's Russian and impatiently takes the paper, turns it over, and taps the back.

"English," she says irritably.

"Oh."

Written in a small, tidy hand, is a phone number: 1221-222-3537. And a note. "Anna, this is the guy, call him today after 9. By the way, he goes by Bob—ha ha! You'll see what I mean. Be wary." No signature.

I translate the English for Mrs. Zhu. Since neither of us knows when the note was written, we have no clue what "today" means or whether "after 9" refers to morning or night.

I ask her what the Russian says.

"I don't know," she answers, shaking her head. "I forget Russian." She puts on her thinker's face, lips pursed, brow furrowed, head nodding up and down. "I will study this problem," she says. I am going to ask what she means, but she stands up. "Right now, you rest. I will bring you some food." She starts for the door.

"Eh eh eh," I grunt, pointing to the exposed body which she had forgotten about.

Mrs. Zhu picks up the sheet, floats it carelessly over the body, and then leaves the apartment.

As soon as the door closes, I try to get up, but my legs are shaky and I experience a wave of vertigo. Perhaps thinking of the cash makes me lightheaded. Wait a minute, I tell myself, and sit back down, close my eyes. That's when I compute the aggregate worth of the money from the woman's pockets. Which, if the packets are uniform, comes out to over fifty thousand dollars.

"Fifty thousand dollars!"

A tsunami of giddiness swamps me. Fifty thousand dollars in my bedroom, in my backpack, on the floor, and no one knows it's there except me. I whistle again, ask myself, what would I do if the money were mine?

Silly question. Because, at this particular moment, who else does it belong to if not me? No one. And the way I am feeling at this particular moment, even in my reduced condition, I have every intention of keeping it. Why not? Because one thing seems certain, the money represents something illegitimate. No innocent person carries that much cash. In other words, I believe there is no rightful owner.

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Not to mention, I've earned it. This thought surprises me. No, what surprises me is how different I feel after my day. After having been roused out of bed in the middle of the night, after spending the day incarcerated on my small patio with a dead body.

Entitled. Or authorized. Or legitimized. Something. Something feels different.

I have to think. I have to have time to think. I have to wait for Mrs. Zhu to return, eat whatever she brings, assure her I am well, and send her away so that I can think rationally, without worrying about her intrusions, without having to explain every wince and tremor of my mind.

Oh, wait. I almost forget. The body. Get rid of the body, but I don't have time to devise a plan.

There is a knock at the door. A sharp, insistent rapping—*baba baba bababup.* A pause and, *bababababup.*

"Coming," I call out in English. And in Chinese, "Wait a moment."

I figure it's Mrs. Zhu, hands too full to retrieve her key.

Opening the door, I realize in the split second it takes my hand to turn the latch that it isn't Mrs. Zhu, that it isn't her knock, too robust, and that no matter how full her hands might be, she would find a way to use her key.

The instant following the latch's click, two more things hit me. First, dismay. That I am so stupid. And second, the door itself. Thrust so fiercely open that I have no time to step aside. Smashing into my chest and heaving me backward. I recall hearing, more than feeling, the crack of my head striking the wall.

The next thing I know, I am slouched limply on the sofa, head throbbing. Night has fallen, the overhead light is on in my living room, the glare hurts my eyes. The air conditioner, which was not on the last I knew, is humming potently and has turned the room into an icebox.

Mrs. Zhu sits beside me, intermittently daubing my face with a damp cloth, fuming constantly in her most penetrating and irritating voice. And two men, one sitting on a hard chair and one standing against the wall, face me from across the room.

The guy standing is monolithic, probably the biggest person I've ever been this close to. I shake my head to make sure I'm not hallucinating. He stands, inert, arms crossed over his chest, head the size of a watermelon, jaws clamped shut. Wearing tight khaki pants and a collared pink pullover shirt.

The other guy, in jeans and a black T-shirt, looks compact and hard, with dark complexion and black eyes, thin lips, a strong chin. His hair has been shaved but is growing out.

I wriggle myself into a more upright position.

"Ha-ha."

I have to stop moving and look squarely at the fellow, unsure if I have

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heard correctly. An articulated sound. Ha-ha. But it's evidently intended as a sign of mirth.

Mrs. Zhu, who must have come in while I was knocked out, is babbling, though I am hearing only sound, as though my head is filled with traffic noises, and getting nothing of her meaning. I'm not sure she is even saying anything real. She points her fingers and flails her hands toward the men. Clumsily, with the same cloth she used earlier, she mops my face. I push her hand away.

"Shh," I say, putting a finger to my lips. The effect is like trying to extinguish a house fire with a puff of breath.

The guy repeats his sound, this time looking at the big guy.

"Ha-ha," he says. And the big guy somehow shifts his weight without moving any part of his body.

The smaller guy kicks his feet forward, crosses his ankles, and leans back in the chair. He laces his fingers behind his head, elbows spread to the side, like elephant ears in an aggressive posture. He speaks in a barely audible voice, which is immediately drowned out by Mrs. Zhu's incessant clamor.

I squint to let him know I can't hear.

Some communication occurs between the two men, though I neither hear nor see it. But the big guy crosses the room in two steps, reaches down, and takes hold of Mrs. Zhu's neck, lifts her to her feet, and impels her down the hall and into the bedroom. From my seat on the sofa, I can see along the hallway to the bedroom door. The guy closes the door, but stands there. Two seconds later, Mrs. Zhu opens the door, squawking mad, and the guy slugs her in the stomach. Not too hard, I can tell, but hard enough. She retreats into the room, closes the door, and is quiet.

The big guy returns, takes his original position, crosses his arms.

"So," says the little guy, still in the chair, still looking relaxed, almost friendly, still speaking so softly that I must strain to hear. "You tell me, okay?" His English is heavily accented.

Despite my day, despite the fact that two strangers are sitting in my apartment, my landlady has been sent to the bedroom, I have fifty thousand unexplainable dollars in my backpack, my head hurts—despite everything, or maybe because of everything, I am not afraid. Maybe it's a resolute trust in logic and reason, a faith in communication, the power of language, a belief in humanity. Maybe it's just the guy himself, his manner, his lack of urgency. Or maybe I'm just too exhausted. Maybe I can't think quickly.

I stare at him for a long moment, take a deep breath, rub my head.

"Are you Bob?"

"Ha-ha." His eyes widen. He looks at the big guy, back at me. "Russian Bob. How do you know this?"

"The woman had a note on her."

"The woman?" Bob says. "What woman is this?" He shrugs. "This woman?"

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He gestures toward the bedroom. "Very nosy." But I think he means noisy, because he flips his hand next to his ear.

"The dead woman," I say, sliding forward on the sofa.

The indoor light reflects off the glass, blocking the view. I push myself up and inch across the room. Open the door and point. But there is nothing. No dead woman. The smell lingers, at least I think it does, letting me know that I hadn't dreamt it. I turn back to Bob, confused, wondering what's going on, wondering what happened while I was knocked out, wondering how long I had been out? Wondering where is the woman's body? I look around, glance down the hall.

I am still in only my underwear, the way I spent the day, the way Mrs. Zhu found me, the way I was when these two guys barged in. And I realize that I'm freezing. I'm shivering and my skin is covered with goose bumps. I step forward, wanting to put my feet on the rug for warmth, but the handmade rug, which I had purchased at the Number 3 Chinese Carpet Factory, is also gone.

Bob takes his time, watching, I assume, the slow progress of my thoughts.

"Oh, oh," he finally says, feigning surprise. "That dead woman. Yes, now I remember." He wags his hand in front of his nose. "Smell very bad."

"Where is she?" I ask.

"Where?" Bob repeats. He opens his palms, shrugs his shoulders. "You want, I can bring her back." He looks at the big guy and says, "Ha-ha." The big guy's lips move but never reach a full smile. Bob says, "I make joke, yes?"

I stare at Bob, look at the big guy, return to Bob. He rearranges himself on the chair, back straight, crosses his knees, and folds his hands on his thigh.

"This problem—" He unfolds his hands and points both index fingers toward the patio. "—I fix this problem for you. All gone. Now, you have no worry about this." He refolds his hands. "Very difficult for you, very easy for me."

"Thank you," I say, uncertain that's the correct response.

"Unfortunately," he says, dipping his head, hunching his shoulders, pulling an exaggeratedly sad face, "your nice carpet, I have to use this."

"Oh," I say, trying to avoid forming a mental picture of the dead woman rolled up in the carpet.

Bob says, "But now I have problem. Not so easy." I wait. "You know this problem, yes?"

I shake my head, arch my eyebrows. He mimics me my expression.

"I don't know," I say. But I'm pretty sure I do know. The money.

"He doesn't know," Bob says to the big guy, who gives no sign he's heard. Bob uncrosses his legs, leans forward, places both hands on his knees, and glares at me. "I tell you my problem, okay?"

"Yes, okay," I say.

His eyes narrow, his head tips slightly to the side, his fingers tighten their grip on his legs. And suddenly his voice is strident, straining his neck muscles, contorting his face into a menacing canine snarl.

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"Where is money?" he yells. "Where is money? Where is money?"

Mrs. Zhu, hearing his bark, hammers on something and shouts wildly from the bedroom, but she doesn't open the door, and her outburst dies out at once.

"Now, you know my problem?" the guy asks. Then, as abruptly as it arose, his anger subsides. He leans back, smiles. "Ha-ha," he says. "Okay, you don't know. I look for money."

Again, responding to no apparent signal, the big guy goes to work. Searching my apartment. Searching and demolishing.

There isn't much in the living room, but he swipes his arm across the shelves, knocking all the books and knickknacks to the floor. Three—supposedly porcelain—statues of Cultural Revolution figures crash and shatter. A cloisonné vase bounces unharmed on the floor.

Mrs. Zhu is now shrieking in the bedroom. I am dumbfounded, sitting stiffly, breathing shallowly.

The big guy moves down the hall and into the kitchen.

"Come, come," Bob says cheerfully. "We can see Kolya find money."

"There is no money," I say, now too petrified to confess, and too locked into an outrageous episode of magical thinking—they won't find it, they won't look in my backpack, they are only trying—and succeeding—to scare me, they will run out of steam, they won't want to go into the bedroom and deal with Mrs. Zhu.

The big guy wrecks the kitchen—breaking dishes, stomping on my one pot and two pans. The food Mrs. Zhu brought is on the counter, a large container of dumplings. The guy swats the whole thing, and the dumplings scatter, like giant pupae, skidding off the counter, sliding across the floor. Two don't fall, and the guy picks up one and pops into his mouth. I'm not sure he even chews, just swallows it whole, like a lizard eating a bird egg.

"Ha-ha," Bob says. "Kolya is hungry."

The big guy smashes the other dumpling with his fist, finds a towel, wipes his hand, and throws the towel in my face.

He skips the bathroom, where there is nothing anyhow, not even a medicine cabinet, and kicks open the bedroom door. Mrs. Zhu is standing on the far side of the bed, arms wrapped around herself defensively, protecting her midsection, absolutely mute and docile.

The giant Russian is amazingly destructive. He empties all the drawers and shelves, splinters the sides of the small wooden chest with a swift kick, and overturns the heavy freestanding wardrobe with barely a nudge.

I take it as a stroke of good luck that the huge wooden piece falls on top of the backpack, completely concealing it. The big guy turns a blank face to Bob. My brain swirls toward relief.

"No money," Bob says, jerking me back to the moment, rekindling

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my apprehension. I don't know if he's asking a question or stating a conclusion. I don't know if the violence will now become personal.

"Maybe someone else took the money," I suggest.

"Mmm?" Bob says. "Who else?" He nods toward Mrs. Zhu. "This woman?"

Sensing she is under scrutiny, Mrs. Zhu shifts her eyes from Russian Bob to me to the floor. I want to scream at her to stop looking so guilty.

"No, no." I don't want Bob to start thinking too hard about Mrs. Zhu or about any of the Chinese people who had been outside that morning. "The people with her when she . . . when she fell or jumped . . . or whatever happened."

"Who are these people?" Bob asks quickly.

I'm thinking of the three indistinct faces I had seen peering from above, the ones Mrs. Zhu had insisted saw nothing. Of course they saw something, I think now, though I don't want to get any further into this than I am. But I see Bob's intensity rising.

"I didn't really see anyone, but . . ." I shrug, flatten my palms, spread them over an imaginary ground. "There she was, she had to come from somewhere." I point my finger, look up.

"Chinese people?" Bob asks.

I don't know for sure that the men I saw were Chinese, but I have never seen any foreigners who weren't associated with me around the complex, so I say, "Yes, Chinese people. Chinese men."

"Mmm." Bob thinks about this. Says, "No, these men, I know. They do not take my money. Too dangerous for them."

"Well, I didn't take your money," I say. Bob looks at me. "You can see that." I wave at the destruction. Then, I add, "I didn't even touch that woman." I put together a gesture and a face of repugnance to underscore my point.

This makes Bob laugh. "Ha-ha." He gets serious. "But you have this woman all day."

"The others," I say quickly and soar my hand to take in the entire complex, "just wanted to put her somewhere until they could get the police."

"Ha ha. Police. No police, though, yes."

I can't tell how this is going.

"I don't know anything about any money," I say, trying for a note of finality.

Resignedly, Bob shrugs his shoulders, exhales loudly. At this, the big guy moves to the door, stepping carelessly on everything in his path. Bob turns completely around, three hundred sixty degrees.

"Okay, okay, okay," he says. "No money. No dead girl. No problem." He looks at me. "Yes or no?"

I don't know what he's asking, but I think he's preparing to leave. A naïve and perilous exuberance swells my head. "Yeah, sure," I say more flippantly than I intend. "Whatever you say."

Bob's hand lashes out snakelike and catches my throat. A searing pain radiates through my body and oozes out through my fingertips.

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"You forget this," Bob says.

"It's already forgotten," I rasp through the fire burning in my throat.

The minute Bob leaves, Mrs. Zhu recoups her voice, apologizing like crazy, vowing to take care of everything, to see to all the repairs and replacements, to cover any expenses arising out of this mess. She lifts her head and sweeps her eyes around the room. She still has her arms wrapped around herself.

"Are you hurt?" I ask, and take a step toward her. She backs up.

"No, no, no," she says. "Not hurt, not hurt."

I give her a look of concern, but she averts her eyes and peers out the window until she sees Bob and the giant emerge from the front door of the building. Then, she leads the way to the patio, and we watch them climb into a waiting black BMW and drive off.

I want Mrs. Zhu to leave also, so that I can count my money. Oddly, she requires no prompting. Going to the door, repeating her apologies, reassuring me that she will take care of everything, that she will send someone first thing in the morning to get the cleanup started. I reiterate that she needn't worry, that I can handle it, that I really only want to sleep for about two days.

"He Laoshi," she says at the door. "Very long day."

"A dreadful day," I reply in English.

Though she doesn't understand, she laughs, and I join in, which causes my throat to hurt where Bob . . . I don't know what he did, jabbed or squeezed.

"He Laoshi?"

"Yes?"

"You forget this, okay?"

"Yes, yes," I promise. "It's already forgotten." I don't bother telling her that Bob said the same thing and I answered him the same way.

I stand on the patio and follow Mrs. Zhu's progress across the courtyard. She passes two people without stopping. I notice a slight catch in her gait and realize that she is still holding herself, arms close, taut and inflexible. It makes her seem awkward and vulnerable but also, I decide, brave and indomitable.

Maybe it's the diminishing burden of the day's emotional weight, a kind of post-excitement, post-tension melancholy . . . maybe it's just pure, simple exhaustion . . . but a wave of doleful affection rinses over me. For Mrs. Zhu. We were in it together, I think to myself.

When she disappears into her own building, I snap loose from my reverie and scurry to the bedroom. Wrestle the broken wardrobe out of the way. Pick up my backpack and carry it to the living room.

It is, of course, empty.

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# SHANGHAIED

## JAMES LINCOLN WARREN

*With apologies to Robert Louis Stevenson*

The way it started was, the Balfour Boys, being my Pa and Uncle Eb, was living in Missouri in the 'forties, chiseling folks on the river with sharp cards, when this fellow lifts some gold right out of some creek in California. Now Pa and Eb being ones for easy money when they could get it, and since they was throwed off most of the finer steamboats where there was ready cash to be had, they decided maybe they'd better move on, so why not California?

They was way too darn lazy to go mining themselves, but as I mentioned they had a way with a poker deck between them, so they took to San Francisco like hogs to slops. Soon they was a fixture at every saloon on the waterfront close by the Golden Gate. Mainly they'd find some flush chump and put the squeeze on him, all the while pretending they didn't know each other, but each'd also work all on his lonesome if the opportunity presented itself. Either way, they split the take fifty-fifty, them being partners and brothers too.

This of course proved quite lucrative. (Pa told me never to use a plain word when there's a two-bit word will suffice, so as to promote the impression of *savoir faire*—that is lessen you have need to appear stupid instead, like in a card game, in which case plain words is to be preferred.) But as the gold started to flow through 'Frisco faster'n piss down a steep gutter, of which they have a plenitude in San Francisco what with all them hills everywhere, they figured up a new scheme and set themselves up as Balfour & Balfour, Attorneys-at-Law. Eb and him lived like heroes. It was a Golden Age that lasted almost seven months.

Things probably would've gone on fine, better'n fine, if only ol' Eb had laid off cheating at cards like Pa warned him to, since they was both now genteel criminals and not mere street corner grafters no more. But I get ahead of myself.

In those days, there was only two lawfully recognized races, those being white folk and Negroes, respectively speaking, so the Chinks didn't quite fit in. Proud scions of a ancient race they might be, but a race that weren't even legal. They was considered more like Injuns



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than anything else. Which brings me to property.

The Chinee, as they weren't legal so much, they could only do business regarding real property (by which I mean land) by engaging the services of a lawyer. A white lawyer, that is. Or maybe two, such as Balfour & Balfour, which as it happens, they did.

Some of these Chinee were engaged in commerce for which Pa and Eb felt a strong inclination, I might even say sympathy, towards—these being prostitution, gambling, and the purveying of opium and suchlike, which Balfour & Balfour were only too delighted to provide legal representation therefore. There being side benefits.

Then tragedy struck.

One late night in the winter of 'forty-nine, Eb fleeced this miner named Stevenson out of every nugget to his name in a crooked game of poker at the card table at Hop Shaw's Jade Joy House. Now this house of Shaw's was a most discriminating establishment, famous for its pretty whores that all looked kind of like delicate little carved figurines. As it happens, it was also solely owned and operated by one of Balfour & Balfour's most eminent Chink clients, he being that same Hop Shaw heretofore mentioned.

Eb's score was several thousand dollars of the purest solid gold, which even compared with all the profits Eb and Pa had gathered in the course of several months' hard shystering, was a respectable gain and not to be sneezed at.

Unfortunately, it turned out there was this newspaper man from St. Louis there that night, too, and being a man of mischief, he recognizes Uncle Eb from a old Kansas City Wanted poster he remembers and tells Stevenson how Eb must have swindled him, but all this after Eb had already collected his winnings and left. As a result of this divulgation, the miner, him not being a real forgiving sort and mighty drunk to boot, got together a posse of his amigos and they go looking for Uncle Eb with guns, clubs, and knives, and also a good hemp rope, hoping to hoist him to a good lynching.

Now Pa, he gets to hear of this and tries to go and warn his brother and also to get his half of the gold, but things being now too hot, he figures he don't have time, as in the meantime it become generally known to the mob that there was actually two Balfour boys. So instead of being after just the one, Stevenson is now after stringing up Pa as well. In short, Pa was forced to skip town before he could even get to Eb, though it broke his manly heart.

Things didn't much go right for Pa after that. First he goes to Sacramento, where within a couple weeks he pupped this Mexican gal from a wealthy ranch family, and was importuned to marry her by the normal means in those days, which means what you think it means. And so I was born in the autumn of 1850, dirt poor and despised among relations who thought I weren't much better than some kit skunk. We had no money because Pa didn't dare try the lawyer scam so close to 'Frisco, him not

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being otherwise gainfully engaged, and Mama's relatives not trusting Pa as far as the end of their noses. So after a while Pa figures it is high time to resume his peregrinating ways. But when Pa abandoned Mama, he took me with him, which made me glad.

So there we was, Pa and me roaming from camp to town to camp, him posing as a Methodist circuit preacher, giving hellfire sermons about the evils of drink and gambling and whoring and whatnot. There was always enough in the collection plate after any particular sulfurous sermon to make Sundays pay pretty good.

And then, of course, there were cards. Always them cards. You'd think a man with Pa's natural good common sense would have the perspicacity to follow his own advice, wouldn't you? Nevertheless, Pa bet one time too many and folded in the end, alas.

His fatal demise came to pass in this strange wise.

Having exhausted our welcome in practically all of California, me and Pa wound up stuck in the desert just into the Nevada territory at this Mormon fort, with nary so much as a penny to our names. The Mexicans call this nasty desert hole Las Vegas, which means The Meadows, if you can call a burning flat stretch of baked caliche bristling with cactus any kind of meadow, which I don't.

So there goes Pa, talking smooth as old bourbon with this stern son of a bitch named Campbell, who had a black beard so long and thick it covered his belly, and whose eyes were cold as a Gila monster's. Now all Pa is fishing after is a angle, so's to get us some grub and hopefully a clean place to sleep. They palaver a while, then Pa comes back.

"This Campbell fellow tells me he's got three wives," Pa tells me, "whereas one was too many for me. Still, the arrangement says something about the size of his appetites. I simply can't believe that any man needing three wives can be as all hellfire free from vice as he pretends."

"I don't know, Pa," says I, because I didn't.

"It stands to reason," Pa says. "You go wait in that there cantina a spell. I got a idea."

I got me a cup of water at the cantina, and the woman there with this sort of dull moon glow in her eyes is starting to talk at me all about Jesus when I hears a shot.

I run outside, and poor Pa has a hole blowed through him by this Campbell, who says Pa was doing Satan's work by trying to seduce him into evil ways by propounding they indulge in a friendly game of chance. So the cards kilt Pa just like they nearly kilt Uncle Eb after all. Or so I thought at the time. Now, looking back on it, it occurs to me that it may have been because maybe that Mormon thought Pa really was a Methodist preacher.

Anyhow, Pa's gasping for breath and bleeding promiscuously into the hard white desert soil when I reach him. "Pa! Don't die!" I cried. "Not without you give me your wallet first!"

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He nods and starts to talk, grunting out the words between gasps, shiny bubbles of blood forming on his lips. His dying words were, "Davie," he says, "you know of your Uncle Eb, he's rich as hell and half that money is now your'n. How he got clear of that vile fiend Stevenson I'll never know, but I heared he now runs that house of Shaw's his own self, which ought to be half mine by rights. So you go find him. He'll want proof, of course, so take my Bible. It's got all the particulars about your nativity and all. Dang that smarts." Then he was gone.

Now would you believe it, but that big, bad, dangerous beast of a Mormon, he starts crying like a girl and going on and on about Pa's poor lost unworthy soul.

"At least he gave you a Bible," says he at length, "that you might not fall prey to his disgusting and impious proclivities. Yes, I do believe there is hope for you yet, youngster. I, too, have a parting gift for you. Take this book, and in this tragic quietus,"—as if he weren't the miscreant himself that plugged my dear old Pa, and then he hands me this *other* book—"may you find solace in the sacred words of the Lord."

I'm pretty sure that Mormon took Pa's wallet, though.

If there's any lonelier place than a deserted church, it's a crowded whorehouse.

When I got to 'Frisco in July of 1866, Hop Shaw's Jade Joy House was still a thriving venture, and the old neighborhood had been christened Chinatown. Chinatown itself was nearby another adventurous neighborhood recently dubbed the Barbary Coast, only because it was slightly less savory than the rest of that town, which was rough all over except for up on the top of the hills where the rich folk lived and had standards. San Francisco never ceased to be a town of opportunity, it seems. I wunst heard a sky pilot call the Barbary Coast a "vicinage of vice," which made me laugh because I thought he meant vicarage. Neither the Barbary Coast nor Chinatown alleys was the sorts of place you went without you carrying an iron and drinking no spirits. But I was young then and knew no better.

"What you wan', big fella?" the maitre d' asked me as I strutted through the front doors. He was yellow as a Texas rose, dressed in quilted royal blue silk, and wore his black greasy hair in one of them long skinny pigtails, clear down to his skinny rump. "You likee pletty Chinee gilly? We got lots nice gilly, you got plenty dollah."

"No thank you, sir, as I ain't in the market so to speak. My name's Davie Balfour," I said, "and I'm here to see my Uncle Ebenezer."

"Your Uncle Ebenezer?" the Chinaman asked, dropping the pidgin all at once and looking like somebody'd slipped some ice down into his privates. "Eb's your uncle? Well, truth to tell, he's kind of busy right now, kid. He's got some important folks back in his office and they're discussing business."

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"That suits me fine," I said. "Half that business belongs to me."

"Are you crazy? You don't want to go interrupting Eb Balfour, kid."

"He'll see me all right."

The Chinaman shrugged. "It's your funeral."

There was a sweet pungent smoke in the air I could not place, which I would have thought was incense if I had known about incense, but which I now know was the fumes of opium. I expected to see the rowdy group of sailors and the like, having been warned by Pa's account of the card game, but I was surprised to see a number of well-dressed gentlemen stretched out under the tables like they was vampires avoiding the sun. Of course, they were doped. I don't know why, but I shivered.

Lots of girls in various states of nature giggled as I walked by, some stretching forth their plump little arms for me, but I wasn't at all interested just then. I had plenty of time to get acquainted later, after all. And I didn't think I could count anybody there as any kind of friend, not yet, anyway. Pa had been dead long enough for me to start missing him, and I did not know who I might trust.

I opened the office door and the stink of opium gave way to the rich heady aroma of good cigars. I marched in like Sherman through Georgia.

There was several gentlemen sitting around a table and smoking long black stogies, and I took the fat, wealthy-looking, mutton-chopped man in the most expensive suit to be my uncle, knowing him to be prosperous.

"Uncle Eb," I says to him, "I am your long-lost nephew, Davie, your brother Lex's boy, come to share in the family fortune. I regret to inform you that my Pa has gone to a better world."

"I ain't your Uncle Eb," he replies angrily. "And never mind who I am. That's your uncle over there." And he pointed to a malignant scarecrow with red eyes brimming over with black malice sitting acrost from him, his shabby old clothes shiny as satin from being wore out. I could see the family resemblance.

"Howdy, Uncle," says I, finally remembering to remove my hat. Pa was like a slave driver when it come to enforcing good manners.

"You say you're Alexander's boy?" His voice was like a crow's, only not so loud.

"I am, sir, come to claim my inheritance."

Uncle Eb frowned. "I'm sorry, but I don't recall as Lex ever left me nothing to pass on to you. A course, he did skip town in a bit of a rush back in 'forty-nine. Frankly, I didn't even know you existed, kid. I'm sorry to hear the old rascal's dead, though. He was a good brother to me."

"That's all right, Uncle Eb. Pa explained to me how he really owned half your business—he give me a full account of the Stevenson affair, and how you was partners and all, and now here I am to take his place. Oh, I almost forgot. Pa told me to show you this here Bible as proof."

Uncle Eb took the book and looked with concentration at the family tree drawn out on the flyleaf, his dry white tongue caressing his brown

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teeth all the time. "Damn me all to hell and back. I guess you really are Lex's whippersnapper." Then he reaches behind him and pulls on a brocaded bell rope.

"I tell you what—Davie, is it?—I tell you what, you must be plumb tired from such a long, hard journey—where did you say you came from?"

"Las Vegas, that's in Nevada. There's a Mormon fort there."

"Yes, a long way, a long way indeed, my boy. So why don't we get you into your room first, so's you can freshen up a bit, and then you can look over your inheritance at leisure, and afterwards, why, we'll go over the books together to show you exactly how much you're worth. And then we'll put you to work. Now that you're a partner, there'll be plenty of responsibilities, you can bet on that."

A Chink the size of a lumber wagon opened up the door behind me, naked except for blue dungarees, straw sandals, and a battered stovepipe hat. I had to look up to see his face. I didn't know that Chinamen grew so big. He smiled at me, and his teeth were red with betel nut, like some giant leech. I didn't like it much.

Then Uncle Eb, he laughs. "Shuan, this here's my nephew, Master Davie, my brother Lex's son, come to live with us. I think this calls for drinks all 'round. How old did you say you are, Davie?"

"Sixteen, Uncle." Well, I was, almost.

"Old enough for a man's tipple, then. Shuan, fetch us some booze from the bar. Not that moonshine crap for customers, but my special Kentucky whiskey. Then you can show Master Davie to his new quarters. Not one of the rental rooms, mind—put him up in Captain Hoseason's regular room. That should be most comfortable."

Shuan bowed, and seconds later showed up with drinks in short glasses for everybody on a silver tray. Now Pa was never too keen on drink, it being necessary in his various trades to keep his wits about him, but I was eager for an experience he'd never allowed me. So following Uncle Eb's example, I downed the drink in one motion, and barely kept from choking to death as fire crept down my gullet and slammed into my belly. It was rough going, but still, it felt real good to be treated like a growed-up man.

I turned and started to express my feelings to Uncle Eb. "That's right decent—"

If I got any more words out, I don't know what they were. I think I was going to say, "—of you, Uncle Eb, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart," seeing as how Pa would have wanted me to be polite, but I don't remember anything until I woke up on board the clipper *Covenant* with a headache to beat the devil.

You just can't trust nobody.

I was lying on a coil of thick manila rope in the bosun locker when I came to. It was Cimmerian dark, but I smelt the cordage and creosote and mildew and felt some around and I touched canvas and cable and what-

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not. Finally, I found the door. It was locked. The boat was rocking, and my head still spun like a weather vane in a June twister, and I felt sick. It was stuffy in there. I feared I might suffocate.

Alone in the pitch dark, you can't help but to get thinking. And I wondered how it was that my own kith and kin had given me to be shanghaied, for surely that's what was going on. I wondered if maybe hadn't it been Pa after all, not Ebenezer, who bilked that Stevenson back in 'forty-nine, and then lied to me about it. It's the kind of thing I'd expect of Pa. So maybe that's why Eb had stayed in 'Frisco whiles Pa had fled for his life. I don't guess I'll ever know for sure. These was dark thoughts, I give you, but then, I weren't in exactly peak condition when they crossed my mind and I was feeling somewhat sorry for myself.

I passed out again, and when I woke up, the first thing I heared was giggling and for a moment I thought I was back in that house of Shaw's. Then I opened my eyes and there's this young kid in front of me, younger than me, or at least smaller, pretty as a petunia, but it's a boy. The door is opened up behind him.

"Up and at 'em," says he. "Cap'n won't like it if you loaf about. By the way, I'm called Ransome, handsome—" and he flutters his long eyelashes at me "—and *then* some."

Oh, Lord, I thinks, all them stories about sailors is true.

He gives me a hand and I take it anyway, since I was the bigger and knew how to best fend off any degenerate supplications on his part, but there was no need to worry. His arm trembled a mite as he helped me up and I realize he weren't exactly in fighting trim to begin with. Contrariwise, he looked distinctly feverish, one of the things making them big brown eyes so prominent being the sunken blue half-moons below them.

My head still throbbed painfully with every heartbeat, but anywhere was better than that bosun locker, so I followed him.

"Who are you, anyway?" he asks.

"David Balfour."

"I wonder why they had you in the bosun locker. You don't walk like no seaman."

"I ain't no seaman. I'm a businessman," I replies.

"Oh. Me, I'm just a cabin boy for now," Ransome replies dreamily, "but someday I'm going to have my very own ship and my very own sailors. Do you want some candy?" And he holds out a sticky hand with a piece of toffee in it.

"No thanks. They give you candy?"

He shrugs. "No, I get some when we're ashore and then sneak it into the galley. I got to hide it else I get flogged. Come on, now."

He led me to a ladder and up we go onto the main deck to meet the captain and the mates.

The *Covenant* was a Boston-built tea clipper, as long and slender and sleek as a Arkansas toothpick, rigged with five or six yardarms on each of

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three masts reaching high like steeples into the sky. Which was gray, since there was fog, it being summer in San Francisco Bay.

Ransome leads me to see the captain, and with a shock like a close lightning bolt I see Shuan standing right next to him. I should've knowed Shuan was a sailor, of course, what with them dungarees, but I thought he was Uncle Eb's servant, the more fool me. He was only at the house to pick up hands for the trip out, and Eb handed me right to him.

Now the fog wasn't so thick I couldn't see that we was at anchor at some distance from town and not yet under weigh. That gave me some hope. I was contemplating my escape, which could be effected if any boats come near, when I felt the collar of my jacket grabbed followed by the seat of my jeans, and the next thing I know, I'm hanging out over the rail above the slate gray seawater lapping against the hull, held as helpless as a mewling infant by the strong arms of the big brute Shuan.

"Mr. Balfour, allow me to introduce myself," says the captain, only I can't see him since Shuan's holding me up and I'm staring down at death below. "I'm Captain Hoseason, and if you behave like a good Christian, I'll make you a member of my crew with the usual amenities thereunto, including wages if'n you deserve them, after a suitable trial, that is. If you choose not to behave like a good Christian, I will have Shuan here drop you overboard without a moment's hesitation. Now I have two questions. Can you swim? And do you understand my proposal as I have explained it to you?"

Now the fact of the matter is I can usually swim like a otter, it being one of the many necessary avenues of escape I was acquainted with through Pa during our travels. That was on the one hand. But on the other hand, there was fog coming in, the water was icy cold and choppy, running in a current faster than a pickpocket plying trade at a county fair, with Lord knows how many secret rips lurking under it like Masons or assassins waiting to pull the unwary bather into the airless salty deep, and me just recovering from being poisoned and still having a violent headache. These were not ideal conditions for such a swim. So after thinking it over carefully for a whole heartbeat or so, I squeals as loud as I can, "No, I can't swim! Please don't let him drop me, Cap'n, or I'll be drownded for sure! I'll be a good boy, I swear it, on my sainted mother's grave!"

This last being a safe oath, as my Mama had every reason to be alive at that time.

"Put him down, Shuan," the Captain responds.

And I'm back on my feet, finally getting a look at my kidnapper. Hoseason was one of those men whose mama's teat must've squirt an unwholesome clabber, and so never looked a day younger'n sixty-five before he growed so much as knee high. He had a broad mouth like a toad, lined from too much shouting and sun like many a nautical man, and frizzy gray hair and whiskers.

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"Captain, sir, how much is Uncle Eb paying you to get me out of the way? I'll double it."

"You don't have so much as a wooden nickel to your name, Davie," says Hoseason. "All's you got is the clothes on your back, your Pa's Bible, and an evil tract from a false religion, concerning the last of which, the only reason I haven't thrown it over the side where it belongs is because I give my solemn oath to your uncle that I would take on board all trace of you to be had, and a man's word is his bond. So even if you did have the money, it's too late."

"You told me I better act like a good Christian," says I, "so how's about you explaining to me how kidnapping a boy ain't against the Bible?"

" 'And he that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death,' " Hoseason recited. "Don't talk to *me* about the Bible, you ignorant urchin. First, you're just a boy and not yet a man. The Bible says nothing on *boys* being stolen."

"I'm almost sixteen."

"And second, Davie, I didn't steal you. I bought you fair and square."

"Like as we didn't just fight a long and bitter war over slavery or nothing."

"And third, I ain't going to sell you, lessen you don't work hard. The way I look at it is, I'm actually rescuing you from a life of corruption and vice by spiriting you away from such cozening influences as your uncle Ebenezer Balfour."

"That's a hoot," I says, "seeing how you got a catamite for a cabin boy."

"Shameless wretch!" he cries and tries to slap me acrost the face, only I backed up too fast for him to reach me. The man next to him, who as I larnt later was the supercargo, Mr. Riach, starts to laugh.

"That's enough out of you, Riach, you smug—" And thereafter I was treated to the most remarkable continuous stream of profanity ever to have blistered my ears. It was so colorful that you couldn't help but raptly listen to it, to marvel at the images the captain called forth from his fecund imagination. It was like art.

And this rapture could be a problem, because he was also likely to whup the crap out of you at the same time. Mr. Riach, now, he was looking as pale as a mainsail in the moonlight, his face half struck with horror, only contained under the strictest discipline. This was a greater accomplishment than it may seem, given that Mr. Riach was also pretty drunk.

Finally the captain stops and looks around him.

"Ransome!" he bellows, though he needn't, not with Ransome right there beside us. The boy looks up at the captain in terror. "Ransome, I told you what would happen the next time you dropped them trousers at the wrong time."

"Please, Cap'n, I didn't do nothing—" and Ransome fell on his knees, begging to be spared. It was awful.

"He didn't do nothing, Captain," I finally pipe up. "Truly and honestly."

"Then how did you know?"

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"Well, there's just a way about him. Anybody can tell."

"Perhaps," says the captain. "But if he does anything where he oughtn't, I'll give him up to Shuan, by God."

Shuan grinned and grunted at that. The rest of us looked down at the deck planks.

"You watch that mouth henceforth, Davie Balfour," Captain Hoseason spits. He then stares malevolently at the whole party. "Get below now, all of you, and get some rest. We weigh anchor at midnight."

"Weigh anchor for where?" I asked.

"Why, away from here," says the captain, as cryptic as you please.

There's three kinds of fog, as I larnt. First, there's your morning fog that comes up with the sun after a cool night over warm land, and which burns away by afternoon. Then there's your sea smoke which comes off the water in the higher latitudes and coats the ocean like a low white blanket. And most dangerous, there's your true fog that lasts for days, thick as a hillbilly drawl, where you can't see your hand a foot away from your face at noon, and seeps into your joints and clouds up your brains. These are such fogs as San Francisco is famous for.

It's even worse at night.

The only reason for getting under weigh in such conditions is that it's more dangerous to sit pat than it is to put to sea, which is saying something. I reckon Captain Hoseason had stronger reasons for getting out of the bay than just me being kidnapped, but I don't guess I'll ever larn what they was. Either way, getting under sail in such blind conditions was surely testimony of sheer madness.

One thing I've noticed about lunacy is that it can be catchier than a tune in a minstrel show. It's got its own crazy rhythm that infects everybody around. The sailors climbed the ratlines as quiet as moss growing on a tombstone, their eyes wide as lenses on a lighthouse, grinning like a bunch of Jolly Rogers. Not a sound was heared except for the scuffling of bare feet on the white oak planks, the turn of the capstan, the creaking of cordage and strakes under strain, and the whisper of water against the hull. Even the sails was lowered as careful as you might let a baby basket out a window. It was like our captain was the Angel of Death, sailing off to collect dumb souls from out of the deep.

Hoseason gripped the binnacle like he'd fall over without it, and never lifted his eyes off the compass. Mr. Riach and Shuan watched after the hands, Shuan gripping his bosun's persuader just waiting for the chance to knout any poor tar who uttered so much as a whisper.

The *Covenant* began to surge forward, light as the wind was, but she was a clipper and made so as to catch even the slightest breath.

I could hear my heart thumping over the clang of invisible bell buoys.

What happened next I won't never forget.

Ransome as I mentioned was the cabin boy. This meant he was to wait

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on the captain like a slave. He must've gotten somewhat cheery after he barely missed getting cruelly slain that afternoon, so he gets into his head that this is the right time to show the captain how scrupulous he is in this the discharge of his duty. Out he comes from the deck house where the galley was, balancing a coffee pot and some tin cups on a tray on his bony little hand like some fancy waiter in a steak house.

"Coffee for Captain Hoseason," he sings, not particular loud, but in the unnatural stillness his sweet voice blared out like a battle.

"Hoseason," he hisses. Without nary a word Shuan clobbers Ransome upside the head, just like that, and the tray falls, the pot and cups clanking as they strike the deck, burning hot coffee spilling all over Ransome, who then yelps like a hurt puppy.

Shuan then takes his persuader, pulls it against Ransome's skinny windpipe, and scrags him, snap, just like you'd swat a pesky fly. He carelessly drops Ransome's limp little body to the deck as me and Riach and the quartermasters all look on in horror. Not the captain, though. His eyes are on that compass.

Me, I wished I had gone for that swim after all.

I don't rightly know how long we all stood there, numb and cold and filled with dread. I can't remember anything except the captain, his hideous face glowing in the orange light off the binnacle lamp, growling curt orders to the helm now and again: "Helm a-starboard—meet her!—steady, steady as she goes . . ."

I reckon the captain's idea was to let the fast ebb tide carry us through the Golden Gate into the wide Pacific. There are wicked shoals to either side, but he knew the waters of that bay like a grizzly bear knows its own mountain.

So it was entirely without expectation that we struck.

The splintering crash from up forward was terrifying and sickening, and the *Covenant* reared her bows like some willful mustang, making Mr. Riach and me lose our footing, sprawling backward on our butts, both of us too skeered to be mindful of any hurt. At first I thought we was all dead, thrust upon the evil gaping maw of them rocks, but then we hear these screams crying for help in Mexican and English pass down either side, and it come to me as we must have collided with another boat whose crew was drownding.

Loud hallooing come from the bow, so I run forward, and there, clinging to the bowsprit lines, I behold a man in a dark buckaroo sombrero hanging on for dear life above the abyss. He swings his feet up and around the line, and I see he's wearing cavalry boots, and he shimmies toward the stem, his duster hanging down from his shoulders like a limp flag.

I reach out to him and he grabs my hand with a grip like a bulldog's bite. I help him up over the rail, and there he stands, not tall, only about my

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height, but with some years on him. He stares at me with a thin, intense face marked by smallpox and framed with long red hair and a Jeff Davis goatee, his eyes wild as heat lightning.

"I am much obliged to you, suh," he says. "You have made a friend of Lieutenant Colonel A. B. Stewart, late of Galveston, Texas, for life!"

"I'm Davie Balfour, late of nowheres in particular," I replies. "Pleased to meet you, mister." I see he's wearing gray woolen trousers with a gold stripe down each side and a fringed buckskin jacket under that duster. Them trousers could mean only one thing, but there was lots of former Confederates with nothing to their backs but their old uniforms in those days, so I didn't think nothing of it.

Mr. Riach chose that moment to appear, and he looks at Colonel Stewart like he was some stark apparition arising from a moldy grave.

"Have I the pleasure of speakin' to the fortunate captain of this vessel, suh?" asks Stewart before Riach can say a thing.

"Cap'n Hoseason is aft at the conn," says Riach. "Follow me."

And as we traipse aft I realize that the sound of the surf is astern at last. We had made it out to the open ocean in one piece after all—well, sort of, there being some damage to the bow but luckily all above the waterline.

Then suddenly the ship came to life, despite the oppressive darkness and fog and lateness of the hour. It was as if everybody let go of holding their breath all at once. The running lights was lit and hoisted, and we hear Hoseason calling for more sail as we walk past the deckhouse between the fore and mainmasts.

Stewart regarded poor Ransome's body with detached interest but said nothing. Hoseason was receiving damage reports from the forward watch and giving clipped instructions as we halted up beside him.

Stewart clicked his heels and made a stiff, shallow bow to the captain.

"Lieutenant Colonel A. B. Stewart of Galveston at your service, suh," he says, removing his hat and offering his hand.

Captain Hoseason put his hands behind his back and glared at Stewart. "And I am Captain Elias Hoseason of Boston," he says, so coldly that I wonder if maybe he was in the Union Navy during the war. "I observe that you wear the trousers of a rebel officer. Is your military rank also a relic of that doomed Confederacy?"

"I am a proud son of the South," says the colonel, withdrawing his hand and clapping the sombrero back on his head. His eyes flashed, even as dark as it was. "And a graduate of the Military Academy at West Point. My rank was earned, suh. But I offer no apologies for my loyalties, Captain, as I expect none from you concerning your own."

The colonel then pulled back his duster and can you imagine if he don't have two Colt six-shooters tucked into a broad belt around that fringed jacket, and a third snug in a holster at his right hip.

Hoseason don't blink an eye but says, "The war is over, sir. There can be

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no cause for quarrel between us. My words were not unkindly meant, only that I am surprised that such an obvious gentleman should not realize the danger attending the use of an obsolete title that many might regard as treasonous. But that is your own affair. We are at sea, in the lap of the Lord, and beyond the grip of nations. I might say how glad I am we was able to rescue you from a most unfortunate encounter."

Stewart looks down at the dead boy and his eyes mist over. "I have lost many gallant fellows, stout and honest men whom I greatly cherished and admired, suh, but I perceive you have sustained a greater loss in this innocent child. I am moved beyond words." That was my first hint what a liar he was.

At this Hoseason actually grins, which was kind of ghoulish in the circumstances, I thought. Maybe it was because he couldn't decide what was funnier, Stewart describing his pack of sea banditos as honest men, or him thinking that poor murdered sodomite Ransome was innocent.

"And now to business," Stewart says, all alert at once, throwing off his melancholy like it never happened. "Where are you bound, Captain? Down 'round the Cape to Boston, or across the wide Pacific to the ancient and exotic Orient?"

"And I might ask where you were bound aboard a smuggler's boat at midnight in an opaque fog," Hoseason says gruffly.

"I was a paid passenger, suh, on my way to Mexico, where I have urgent business requirin' my immediate attention."

"Then I have bad news for you, Colonel," Hoseason says, "as we are bound for China."

"Alas, it is as I feared. But, hold, suh—might I convince you to change your itinerary, Captain? Slightly, that is. Only as far as San Diego—" like San Diego ain't almost five hundred miles from 'Frisco "—and I will pay you and your crew handsomely for such a favor." And then Stewart reaches inside his jacket after some struggle pulls out a money belt. He opens it up briefly and withdraws a gold coin, which he slaps it in Hoseason's palm, and returns the belt to his waist.

"This ain't California gold," says Hoseason. "Why, it's a gold Napoleon!"

"I travel with many of its fellows," Stewart says, casually resting his right hand on the handle of one of his Colts. "I'm sure we can arrive at an arrangement, one that would benefit us both in equitable measure."

"I will certainly consider it," says Hoseason, reluctantly offering the Napoleon back to Stewart. "But it will have to wait until morning. I do not dare to head south in these conditions, Colonel, not until I am assured of sufficient sea room in which to run. Prudence and vigilance, sir, above all."

"Then perhaps I might avail myself of a place to repose in the meantime."

"Davie," says Hoseason, "I'm promoting you to cabin boy. String up a hammock for the colonel in the galley."

I nod, and he scowls at me, so I salute, and then he shakes his head in disgust.

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"This way, Colonel," I says, and he follows me to the deckhouse.

Now this deckhouse was not just the galley. *Covenant* not having an armory like a warship, this was where Captain Hoseason stored the ship's arms, these being rifles and pistols used to discourage pirates and allied scum, as well as the cartridges, ball, and powder needed to make use of them, and also where the Yale safebox was kept, which contained the crew's payroll and all the specie required for the voyage. It was the only room on board to hang a hammock for an unexpected passenger, the ship having filled all the berthing spaces by such methods and means as I have already familiarized to you. But I'll bet the captain thought worse of putting Stewart up in there even as the words came out of his mouth.

"Wait here," I says, as Stewart looks over the guns, because I realized that I'd have to go fetch a hammock from Mr. Riach, who kept everything worth more'n a penny under in the slops locker, which don't mean swine's victuals as you might suppose, but's what they call the crew's clothing. I don't know why.

Anyway, I'm just in time to see some of the hands lift Ransome over the rail and drop him in the water. They didn't even bother to cover him up or weigh him down. And this prompts me to ruminate some on how fleeting is this mortal coil, remembering also that Pa had recently croaked, but not for too long.

I approach Mr. Riach, who is in heated conference with the captain. So heated they don't so much as notice I'm nearby.

"Dawn's the time to attack," says Hoseason. "He can't get us all if we approach from different directions."

"He has three repeating pistols," says Riach. "He'll kill us all before we can lay a hand on him."

"He has only two arms," says the captain, "and his eyes can't look in two directions at once. I just send in some hands to truss him up, they don't have to know about the pistols, and eventually we overwhelm him. Or we simply send in that bloodthirsty scoundrel Shuan to take care of him."

"It's too risky, sir. We got to get him out on deck after breakfast."

"On deck. Yes. Yes, you're probably right."

"Mr. Riach, I need a hammock," says I a little too loud, like I just got there and hadn't heared them.

They look at me all startled, then exchange glances.

"Right, Davie," he says. "Let's go to the slops chest, then."

So we head below. Once out of earshot of the skipper, Riach says to me, "So what do you think of our colonel, then?"

I shrug like I don't care and say, "Well, he ain't nothing but a dirty reb, for one thing."

Riach looked like he was about to say something but changed his mind.

Now I didn't give a tarnation about Stewart being an erstwhile

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Confederate. He could've been the Turkish Sultan for all I cared. True, Pa had favored Dixie's side during the war as far as I remember, though not with such devotion that it ever prevented him from milking whatever cow was at hand, if you follow me. However at that moment, it seemed a lot safer to side with the presiding Northern sentiment on board, so that's what I done.

Riach give me the hammock and I went back to the deckhouse thinking on things.

When I got back to the deckhouse, I found Colonel Stewart leaning against the forward bulkhead with his eyes on the door, which reminded me that Pa never, ever played in no card game where there was a door to his back. So the colonel was already somewhat wary of the captain and crew.

"Colonel, it's a miracle you being saved like you was," I says nonchalant-like, "verily plucked from the sea, I mean."

"Indeed. As it says in the Bible, 'Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivereth him out of them all.'"

"Well I don't know about that, even though my Pa, he knew the whole Good Book by heart. But he also says to me, Davie, the Devil himself can quote scripture, and I know that's true, because Captain Hoseason is fond of spouting some himself to justify his wickedness. Colonel, I got to warn you that you been rescued by a bunch of filthy Yankee thieves intent on stealing your gold. There's already been murder tonight. That dead boy you seen on deck didn't die in no crash. That big Chinaman crushed his throat for making too much noise with not more ado than you'd spit on a cur. They's a dire and sinful crew, sir."

Colonel Stewart narrows his eyes distrustfully.

"And what about you, Davie? Why are you telling me this?"

"Why, I was kidnapped," I tell him. And then I gave him the whole story, suitably altered, of course, to shed more credit upon me and my sufferings and invoke the colonel's sense of *noblesse oblige*, as Pa would call it. And I finish with, "I heared them plotting to kill you to get at those Napoleons. They intend to lure you out on deck come sunrise. I couldn't just let that happen, could I?"

"My own life is of little consequence," the colonel says, "and I would gladly sacrifice it in the line of my sacred duty, but the gold, Davie, the gold is dedicated to a holy purpose. With its help, the South will rise again!"

"Maybe someday, Colonel, but what are we going to do right now?"

"Defend ourselves, boy. The captain has unwittingly settled us in a veritable redoubt." And he laughs, his excitement brimming over like hot coffee aboil on a stove. "Fust, we bar the doors and shut all the windows. Can you handle a sixgun?"

"Well, I—"

"Don't worry none. I'll teach you. But mostly what I need from you is

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to load these weapons and make them available to me as needed. This will be a glorious day, a battle to remember, my boy!"

By now dawn was not far off, so I took down the rifles and began to load them one by one, stacking them against the bulkhead. When this was done I started in on the pistols.

I was still at it when there was a pounding at the door. First light was upon us.

"Colonel Stewart, why have you locked the door?" Captain Hoseason demands to know. "If'n we can't get in to start the fire in the galley, why, it means a cold breakfast."

"You can eat hot lead, you damn Yankee," cries the colonel, and he shoots through the door. Hoseason bellows in pain, but he weren't kilt, because I hear him giving orders in a low voice so's I can't quite make out the words. There's some scuffling outside.

"Colonel," he shouts, "hold your fire. Let's be reasonable. We are both men of the world. I'm sure we can come to a suitable arrangement."

"He's stalling for time," I whisper as loud as I dare. "I hear men climbing up on the roof. I bet they got axes."

"We'll see about that," says Stewart, and he fires three rounds from each hand into the overhead, splinters flying everywhere, me protecting my face with my arm, but the sailors above us cry out in alarm and jump off the roof, landing with a thud on the main deck. The room stinks of gunsmoke and my eyes start to smart.

Somebody gets the idea of trying to get at us through one of the windows. Now these windows, they're narrow and high, maybe just wide enough for a thin man to crawl through, but what with all the unprincipled scoundrels on board, I'm sure there was somebody willing to try. The last thing you want in such close quarters is some Malay cutthroat slipping in, I can tell you. So, suddenly the glass is being knocked out of the windows with belaying pins and so forth, shattering into sharp flying shards around us like it's raining razors.

Stewart fires several rounds out the windows, then tosses his pistols on the floor like they was trash, and grabs the one in the holster. He let fly with that, too, and I'm starting to go deaf with all the noise.

In the meantime, a spare mast was brought up from the hold, and the crew heaved it back and forth in rhythm, finally smashing it against the door like a battering ram. After the first blow, the bar acrost the door was cracked some and the hinges parting from the frame.

Stewart's pistol hammer clicks on a empty chamber. He's out of ammo. The door is about to collapse. Now things is truly desperate.

He turns to me, his face afire with bloodlust and the joy of battle. It was just for the tiniest moment, but it's an image burnt right into my memory as clear and hot as summer sunlight on the Mojave.

He reaches for the rifle I'm holding, laughing with demonic glee.

"Give it to me, Davie!"

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So I shot the crazy bastard right through the heart.

It didn't take no genius to realize that Colonel Stewart's plan was sheer suicide, you see. I weren't inclined to die just then. Still ain't. It was either him, or both of us.

Not that I didn't get the thrashing of my life for helping him out, no matter how much I protested to Captain Hoseason that the colonel had forced me into it. The captain weren't in such a good mood having been winged, you see. I don't know whether they ever believed me or not, though I believe as it made no difference, but Pa always told me you should never change your story wunst you settle on it.

Shuan had an enthusiasm for that manner of task, and thumped me better than I really deserved, so that afterward I spent the long period of recuperation reading Pa's Bible and that *Book of Mormon* which Campbell give me, being otherwise unable to move. Long before I was up and about, Hoseason and Riach came to visit me, wanting to know what Stewart had done with that money belt, because they hadn't been able to find it after I'd let them in the deckhouse over Colonel Stewart's dead body.

"Well, I don't have it," I says, which was the simple truth. "He must have hid it somewhere in that deckhouse before the donnybrook got started."

"It ain't there," says Riach. "We looked high and low."

I shrugged and got back to my reading.

I was pretty well completely healed by the time we beat upriver to Shanghai. This is one of the busiest harbors in the world, with ships on it as plentiful as cussing 'round a campfire. So many were there that the *Covenant* must anchor out in the river, waiting for a berth. So late that night I collected Stewart's money belt from where I'd stashed it in Ransome's hidy-hole where he hid his candy below the stove, wrapped my books in oilskin, and slipped down the anchor cable to the water.

Swimming to shore was the easy part.

Pa always told me a man's got to be trained to be good at anything, and I knowed it was true. I mean, he didn't master the art of cheating at cards without some hard study along the way, did he? And after all our travels, there was really only one occupation he taught me for certain, and only one thing I could study. I was already rich thanks to the colonel, but I'd larnt my lesson about being discreet, and knew it was high time to pursue a calling.

Now, of course I never had none of them secrets and passwords and all that other nonsense, but how can that matter? This is China, not Salt Lake.

And that's the story how I come to be the first Mormon bishop on the Yangtze.

More tea?

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# REEL CRIME

## J. RENTILLY

Most authors will tell you: having their work translated from the printed page to the screen, big or small, oftentimes just plain stinks. Far be it from author Charlaine Harris to bite the hand that feeds; the maestro behind Southern Vampire Mysteries, the irreverent book series that re-imagines vampire lore in a steamy Southern setting, says that working with Hollywood does not—gratuitous vampire joke alert!—suck at all.

Charlaine Harris. Photo by Caroline Grayshock. Courtesy of Penguin.

Last September, HBO—the cable network behind such critically and commercially successful series as *The Sopranos, Deadwood,* and *The Wire*—premiered a weekly series based on Harris's eight-book sequence, which has been published in more than a dozen countries. Shepherded to the small screen by Alan Ball *(Six Feet Under, American Beauty)* and starring Oscar-winner Anna Paquin *(The Piano, X-Men)*, the show—mixing equal shots of sex, supernatural, humidity, gore, and politics—chronicles the adventures of Sookie Stackhouse, a Louisiana barmaid and telepath, whose life becomes complicated by a band of vampires interested in equal rights.

*True Blood* creator, executive producer, writer, and director Alan Ball. Photo by John P. Johnson.

"The show has stayed absolutely true to the spirit of the books. It's a mixture of humor, horror, romance, and politics. That's what makes the books a pleasure to write, and that's what made them so hard to sell," says Harris. "And the Sookie on the screen is the Sookie in the books: brave, loyal, open-minded, and tormented. I couldn't be happier."

When the fifty-seven-year-old Harris was initially approached about rights to the Sookie Stackhouse mysteries, she was less than sanguine; several of her twenty-four books had previously been optioned by Hollywood, but never amounted to more than chump change to buy Harris a new car. When it was made clear that Alan Ball and HBO were among the interested parties, Harris began howling at the moon. "I was convinced that Alan under-



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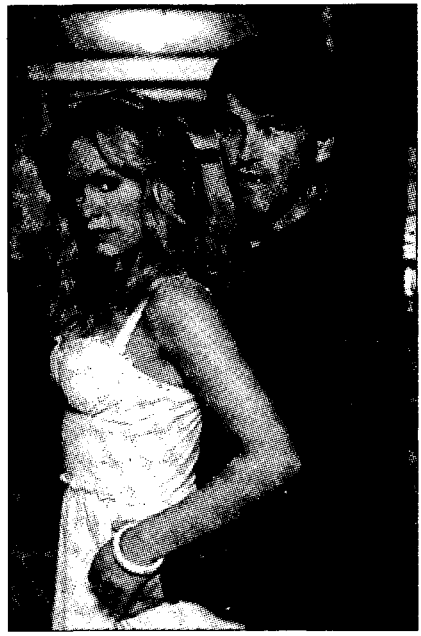
stood my work and what I was trying to say," says Harris, who insisted that Southern Vampire mysteries be a series, not a stand-alone film.

The fifty-one-year old Ball wrote and produced TV series *Cybill* and *Grace Under Fire* before winning an Oscar for penning the acid, poetic *American Beauty* in 1999, then launching the cult hit *Six Feet Under* for HBO in 2001. He was not looking to return to television when he discovered Harris's novels, quite by accident. "I was browsing in a bookstore one day and I saw this title, *Dead Until Dark*, which had the tag line, 'Maybe having a vampire for a boyfriend isn't such a bright idea,'" recalls Ball. "I thought that sounded like fun, so I bought the book—the first in Charlaine's series—and I could not put it down. I became addicted."



Anna Paquin as Sookie Stackhouse and Stephen Moyer as Bill Compton in *True Blood*. Photo by Prashant Gupta.

Ball quickly devoured Harris's other Southern Vampire books, and immediately began plotting his return to HBO, the series's first season playing out storylines from *Dead Until Dark*, honoring Harris's "matter of fact" approach to the supernatural. "We want to keep the supernatural rooted in nature, so that it's just more nature than we're used to in everyday life," says Ball. (Subsequent seasons of *True Blood* may be devoted to successive novels in Harris's book series; for example, season two will likely be devoted to the second novel, *Living Dead in Dallas*).

While Harris says that Ball has honored the source material beyond the call of duty, she has been surprised to enjoy "the advancement of all the supporting characters" from her books. "I didn't realize what a difference this would make, and it's been a surprise to see new story threads," says Harris. "On the other hand, I hear words I wrote up on the screen, which makes me laugh every time."

Though Ball has retained the moral, spiritual, and political complexity that made *Six Feet Under* so resonant and watchable, he promises that *True Blood* is "more fun, more of an adventure." He also insists that, much like *Six Feet Under*, viewers can always expect the unexpected from his new series. To prepare for making *True Blood*, Ball watched "just about every vampire movie ever made," and



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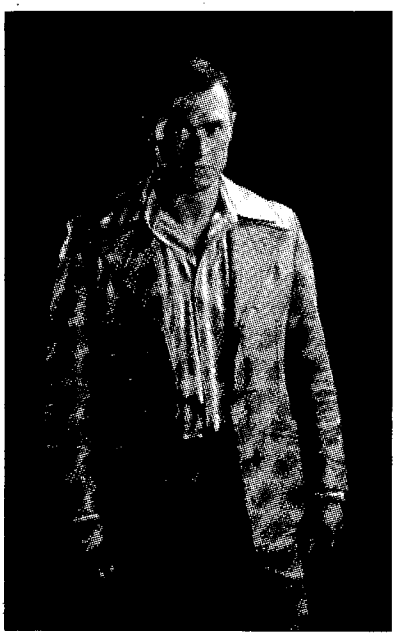
decided he would, in almost every case, do exactly the opposite. "I'm trying to avoid all the vampire clichés—no crazy contact lenses, no opera music, no blue light," he says. "This show is rooted in the characters, in Louisiana, and it's important that it seems like the story could be really happening, and not just some fantasy world."

This suits Harris—who relishes the series's "for mature audiences only" moments—just fine. "I started out wanting to write about vampires, but I also wanted to poke fun at some of the tired old storylines, maybe twist things around a little," she says. "Supernatural creatures have to pay property taxes, too, right?"

*True Blood* has been given an enormous marketing push by HBO, but regardless of the its ultimate fate—Will critics drive a stake through its heart? Will audiences respond to it as a vampire does to garlic?—Harris intends to continue the Sookie Stackhouse saga. This fall, she will publish two Stackhouse short stories, one in the *Usual Suspects* (Ace), the other in the second anthology that she edited with Toni L. P. Kelner, *Wolfsbane and Mistletoe* (Ace). Stackhouse will get her own ninth novel, *Dead and Gone*, due for publication next May. Perhaps as vampires are immortal, Harris's creative output is equally unstoppable.



Jason O'Mara as Detective Sam Tyler in the American *Life on Mars*. Photo courtesy of ABC.

Instead of being lifted from the printed page, ABC's *Life On Mars* is instead taking its inspiration from a critically-lauded BBC television series about a modern-day cop who inexplicably wakes up in 1973 and must find out why, while solving standalone crimes each week. If that series's overarching mystery is Byzantine—and producer Josh Applebaum promises the resolution to the American version will be decidedly more complex than England's "oh, the guy was in a coma and imagined the whole damned thing"—then moving the show across the Atlantic has proven to be even more so.

When ABC first decided to import the popular British series, which ran two seasons across the pond, veteran show-runner David E. Kelley *(Ally McBeal, Boston Legal)* held the show's creative reins. After producing a deeply divisive pilot episode—great story, middling cast, needs some



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work—Kelley decided to part ways with the network, crying "creative differences." Alias veterans Applebaum and Andre Nemec were brought on in his stead. Subsequently, the show was recast virtually head to tail—lead Jason O'Mara *(Men In Trees)*, notably, survived, while Lisa Bonet, Harvey Keitel, and Gretchen Mol, all better known for their big-screen work, were added. Also, the show's location was also changed to New York City from Los Angeles.

The stars of the original BBC production of *Life on Mars,* Philip Glenister as DCI Gene Hunt and John Simm as DI Sam Tyler. Photo courtesy of BBC Worldwide America. .

Now driven by their top-drawer cast, a rejiggered mythology ("more satisfying than the British one," says Applebaum), and a seventies-era rock 'n' roll soundtrack, *Life On Mars* premiered on ABC in October, in the plum spot behind *Grey's Anatomy.*

Applebaum says the show, which reshot its pilot and is now about halfway through its season production schedule, is firmly on track, and that he and the show's creative team are constantly checking the British source material for inspiration. "The key to a successful translation is neither being too literal to the source material, nor veering too far away from what made it work," says Applebaum. "We often talk about 'maintaining the essence' of what made the BBC version so spectacular, not being dogmatic to every plot point and character development, rather making sure at every juncture we are being true to the tone and spirit of the original."

Applebaum cops to lifting several of the original series's "case of the week" mysteries, simply because they were so compelling to begin with. "They were so good, we would have been fools not to cannibalize them," he says.

But the mystery surrounding O'Mara's lost-in-time Detective Sam Tyler will vary greatly from the BBC original, as fans of the labyrinthine *Alias* might expect. "We are going down a very different path," says Applebaum. "We don't want new fans to go to Wikipedia and see how it all ends."



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# REMEMBERING TALLY

## JOHN M. FLOYD

"Try to look impressed, sir," Fenton whispered.

J. Talmadge Byrd snorted as they stood in the office doorway. It was his first visit to what his campaign staff called their "blue-collar location"—a large, seedy-looking room on the second floor of a West Side office building. Two of the walls were lined with huge windows, open not only to the gloomy day but to the rather appropriate odor of the nearby stockyards. "I'm a candidate for governor, Freddie," Byrd replied, pasting a wooden smile on his face for the assembled crowd. "Not an actor."

"Begging your pardon, sir, it's the same thing."

Which was about as close as Fenton ever came to opposing a statement made by his boss. As Tally Byrd's personal secretary and PR advisor, he made it a point to agree with Byrd's every opinion—or at least appear to. Freddie Fenton was widely considered the most shameless yes-man in American politics.

"Members of the media," Fenton called, pushing past Byrd and waving a sheaf of papers, "gather round, please. Ground rules. Over here, please."

The half-dozen TV and newspaper reporters exchanged glances and rolled their eyes, but they obeyed. They knew that Byrd would probably soon be the next governor of their state, despite a number of recent lapses in judgment, both professional and personal. Due mainly to the skills of both his campaign manager and Freddie Fenton, Byrd had escaped disaster when the press got wind of his alleged ties to organized crime, not to mention a number of recent affairs with subordinates and staffers.

Thankfully for people like Byrd, politics—like the stock market—is an inexact science, and the most corrupt and least qualified candidate sometimes manages to emerge as the frontrunner in the polls. Members of the news media merely sighed and shook their heads and mumbled the same words into their drinks each night: Only in America.

While Fenton stood in the circle of journalists and reporters and read through a list of what was acceptable and what wasn't, retired oil baron Tally Byrd—slim and silver haired and five foot four on tiptoe—strutted about the long room with an outthrust chin, slapping backs and braying jokes, and pumping the hands of the more notable attendees. Several



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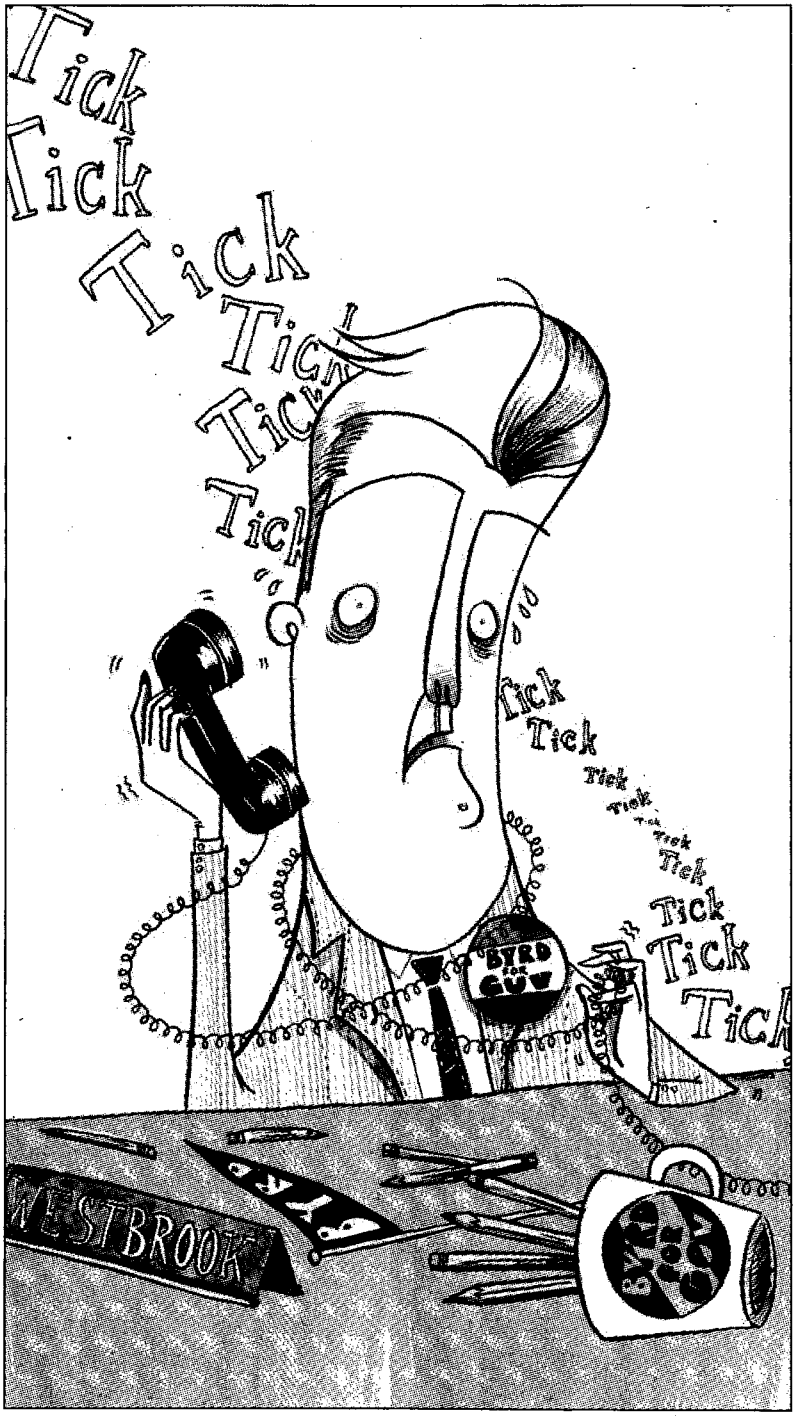


Kelly Denato

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minutes had passed before he made his way to the old metal desk set farther back in the room. The nameplate on the desk said NANCY WESTBROOK, and the lady standing at attention beside it introduced herself in a tiny voice as the head of this particular campaign office.

The dapper little candidate studied her a moment as she rattled on about the certainty of his upcoming victory. She was a large woman with thick makeup, a shapeless dress, carrot red hair, and a blue and white BYRD FOR GUV button pinned to her collar. As if he cared, she pointed out to him two of the other volunteers—a bald man with a bowtie and a very pregnant young lady—who were seated at desks between him and the far end of the office. Both were speaking on the telephone, and neither looked up. Work at a well-run campaign site never ceases, Ms. Westbrook explained proudly—even during the final minutes before a press conference.

As she rambled on, Byrd tuned her out and began rehearsing his speech in his head. He was halfway through it when he noticed something strange near the back corner of the room, past the volunteers' desks.

"Your safe's open," he said.

Ms. Westbrook stopped in mid sentence. She followed his gaze, then smiled. "Oh, that. It's not a safe, I'm afraid. I mean, it is a safe—but there's nothing in it. We keep no money or confidential papers. No one here even has a key."

Byrd was not impressed. He had run a successful oil company for many years, and rules were rules. "Shouldn't its door at least be kept closed? For appearance's sake?"

"Well, that's a long story," she said. "You see, this isn't the best part of town, and we've had a few bomb threats, bricks through the window and so forth, and everybody's a bit jumpy. Anyhow, little Sherry Jackson—she's the pregnant lady back there, my best worker—almost quit a few weeks ago. She'd convinced herself that sooner or later we'd all be either burned up or blown up. Then one day somebody suggested that if there's a dire emergency she should just jump into the safe and pull the door shut. It'll lock if it's closed, it's probably bulletproof and fireproof, and she's the only one around here tiny enough, even when pregnant, to fit inside." Ms. Westbrook smiled. "She's been satisfied ever since."

Byrd smiled also. From the corner of his eye he saw Freddie Fenton standing nearby with several others, some of them reporters, who also appeared to be listening to Westbrook's story.

"That's fine in theory," Byrd said, amused, "but how would she breathe in there, if things ever actually went that far?"

"See how big her purse is? I'm told she keeps a canister of oxygen in it, like a little scuba tank. Enough to last until a rescue, anyway." Nancy Westbrook's face suddenly darkened, and she included Fenton and the others when she spoke next. "Don't any of you say anything to her about it, though. That's her business, not ours."

"I agree completely," Byrd said. "Whatever makes my people happy

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makes me happy." What would really make him happy, he thought, would be for his "people" to shrink a few inches; this woman towered over him. With a glance at his watch he turned to look for Fenton, who—apparently reading his boss's mind—silently mouthed: "Three minutes."

The TV cameras were rolling now, and several were aimed in the candidate's direction. Having noticed this, Talmadge Byrd turned back to Ms. Westbrook, took her hand, and dipped his head in an elegant bow. "Keep up the good work, my dear," he said warmly.

At that moment the phone rang on Nancy Westbrook's desk.

She picked it up, listened a moment, and handed it to Byrd. "For you, sir. Whoever it is says it's urgent."

With a sigh he came around the desk and plopped down in Westbrook's chair. It was too high for him, which irritated him all the more; his feet barely touched the floor. "Tally Byrd here," he barked into the receiver. "But I warn you, I don't have much time."

"You have a lot less than you think," the voice on the phone said.

Something in the tone of that statement made Byrd pause. "Who is this?"

"Listen to me carefully, Mr. Byrd. There is a bomb in the bottom right drawer of the desk where you're sitting—it's locked, by the way—and you have exactly two minutes and twenty-eight seconds before it explodes. Do you follow me so far?"

Talmadge Byrd's mouth dropped open. He suddenly found it hard to breathe.

"But I warn you—don't try to run. I'm watching you right now from a window across the street, through the scope of a .303 Lee-Enfield sniper rifle. You make any move toward the door, I put a bullet through your head. Nod if you understand."

For a second Byrd stayed frozen, then slowly nodded. His eyes darted to the long row of open windows, and through them to the office buildings on the other side of the street.

The voice continued. "Why, you might ask, am I taking the trouble to tell you you're about to be vaporized? Well, that's complicated. You see, I am experiencing a rare bout with my conscience. It was my original intention to blow all of you away at once—the explosive charge is certainly big enough—but then I realized that would be a waste. It's mostly you I want, so I've decided to let you make the decision."

Byrd was holding his breath. A corner of his mind registered the fact that the cameras were still on him as Fenton and the media crews made final preparations. For all the good that did him now, he thought. "What decision?" he murmured.

"Whether to let them live," the voice said. "At this point, you see, you have just under two minutes until detonation. If you choose, I will allow you to sound the alarm so the others can escape. There's plenty of time—just shout 'Bomb!' or 'Fire!' or whatever suits your fancy, and we'll watch,

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you and I, while they stampede out of the room. That's one option. The other, of course, is to do nothing, in which case you'll still die, but everyone else'll die along with you." A short pause. "Zero hour is three o'clock exactly. One minute and thirty-five seconds from now."

Byrd licked his lips. He was sitting rock-still, moving only his eyes. The crowd at the front of the room was paying him little attention. Fenton seemed to be arguing with someone about how to position the microphones and the podium. Now and then someone glanced his way, but no one seemed to want to interrupt what was apparently an important call. The cameras were still rolling, probably to get filler footage before the main event.

He swallowed. "Why are you doing this?" he whispered.

A short laugh. "If you mean why the bomb, it's because I think you have to be stopped, Tally. Pure and simple. If you mean why the choice . . . I suppose it's a test. For months now you've been preaching to the whole state that the only thing you care about's the people and their welfare. 'Whatever I do, it's for the good of my fellow man,' you said. Well, here's your opportunity. At least a hundred of your fellow men are right there in that room with you, and you've got just over a minute left. They can still make it out if you tell 'em now." He paused. "Not many of us get a chance to control the way others will think of us after we're gone, you know. If you do this, you'll be remembered as a hero."

Byrd hesitated, sweating. His eyes swept the office. The guy was right, the crowd had grown—reporters, lawyers, the mayor, assorted friends and enemies. Dozens of faces he didn't even know. But as he scanned their ranks he wasn't thinking of whether to warn them or not. It wasn't their lives he was worried about.

There had to be a way . . .

"Fifty seconds," the voice announced.

The candidate's mind was racing. This part of the room was too exposed, the door too far away. Maybe if a few people walked past, he could use them for cover—but that was no good either: Not a soul was standing anywhere near him, probably so he could have some privacy. The irony of that was maddening.

"Half a minute left," the voice said.

Frantically Byrd tried to focus his thoughts. Maybe it was a hoax. Hadn't the Westbrook woman said there'd already been several false bomb threats? On an impulse Byrd reached down and tugged on the bottom right-hand drawer. Sure enough, it was locked.

But it wasn't empty. He could hear something . . .

Something ticking.

His heart lurched in his chest.

"Fifteen seconds, Mr. Byrd. Too late now. You really are spineless after all, aren't you?"

Suddenly Byrd had the answer. He knew what to do, and with that

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knowledge came a surge of hope. He whipped his head around for a look, then forced himself to wait a moment, until the voice spoke again:

"Well, Tally, any last reques—"

*NOW. While the guy was talking . . .*

Without warning Byrd launched himself from the chair, running as fast as he could—but not toward the door. He ran toward the back of the room.

The young volunteer, Sherry Jackson, looked up as she heard the gasp of the crowd, then froze as she saw Byrd charging straight for her. Before she could react he shoved her aside, sending her sprawling, and snatched her purse-strap from the back of her chair as he passed. The room watched as if hypnotized.

Purse in hand, Byrd sprinted for the safe. When he reached it he tossed the purse inside, wedged his small frame in after it, and pulled the door shut behind him. The heavy, metallic THUD shook the room.

In the ten seconds that followed, no one moved. The office was dead quiet except for the painful moans of the pregnant woman lying on the floor.

It was three o'clock sharp.

"I suppose the cameras caught the whole thing?" Freddie Fenton asked.

The time was three twenty-five, and most of the crowd had been cleared out. Those remaining were Fenton, the mayor, the TV crews and newsmen, a few of Byrd's staff, and several cops from the station down the street. The paramedics had arrived moments ago, and had transported the injured young lady to the hospital. Two firemen hovered over the safe while a welder worked with his torch on the locking mechanism. Muffled thumps and shouts came from inside.

"You bet they did," a reporter answered. He looked so smug Fenton wanted to punch him in the teeth.

"Mr. Fenton?" a voice called. "Step over here a minute?"

It was one of the policemen. Fenton gave the media people a parting glare, then crossed the room to where the cops were talking to a new arrival—a security guard with the letters W. KELLY on his nametag. "What is it, Officer?" Fenton asked. God, he felt tired.

"Thought you might want to hear this." The cop placed an audio cassette recorder on a desktop and pressed PLAY. "It explains a few things," he added.

For the next two and a half minutes Freddie Fenton listened to a crystal clear recording of a phone conversation between J. Talmadge Byrd and a man who claimed to be about to blow up the building.

When it was finished Fenton's face was pale as the gray desktops. "Is this for real?" he asked.

"The conversation's for real. The bomb threat wasn't, obviously. We've already sprung the bottom right drawer of the desk—all we found was a regular wind-up alarm clock."

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"But—the tape. Where'd it *come* from . . . ?"

"That's the craziest part," the officer said. "Whoever called knew his stuff. That particular phone—the one on the head lady's desk—had been patched into the building's security console, and got recorded automatically." The cop nodded in the direction of the uniformed guard. "Kelly here got a call just after three, asking him to check the tape."

"A building like this has a security console?" Fenton asked.

"It's old, but it works. Unfortunately, for your candidate."

Fenton nodded. His head was aching. "So the guy who called . . . could he really see through the window? I guess he could, if he knew what was happening—"

"Not necessarily. He could've called from right here in the office, with a throwaway cell phone."

Freddie Fenton tried hard to gather his thoughts. It occurred to him that reporters were still swarming all over the room. He looked at the recorder. "Is this the only copy?" he asked, lowering his voice.

"I know what you're thinking," the cop said, "but it really doesn't matter."

"What do you mean?"

The policeman ejected the cassette and handed it back to the guard. "Whoever it was, was quite a technician. The call wasn't just routed into the security tape, it was sent to the main speakers. Everybody in the building, except those on this floor, heard the whole thing, as it was happening. Over the PA system."

Fenton exhaled and closed his eyes. In his mind he replayed the part of the conversation where Byrd had been given the choice of saving the others in the room. "Sweet Mother Mary," he whispered.

People from downstairs had trickled in now, he noticed. The story was circulating; faces registered shock and disgust. Eager cameras filmed every reaction, recorded every comment. The representatives of the news media, Fenton thought, were grinning like a bunch of Boy Scouts who had just discovered their summer camp was being held by mistake at a nudist colony.

The mayor, who had strolled over, said to Fenton: "Damage assessment?"

Fenton shook his head. "He's finished. It doesn't matter that there was no bomb. What matters is that Tally thought there was and decided to save his own skin rather than his supporters'. And now everybody knows it."

The mayor nodded sadly. "Hard to believe," he said.

"What's really hard to believe," Fenton replied, "is the timing. If that redheaded woman—the location manager—hadn't mentioned the pregnant lady and her plans for the safe . . ." Fenton sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "She must've gone home, I haven't even seen her since she took the call. What was her name? Westwood?"

"Westbrook," the security guard interrupted. "She's over there, talking to Channel 4. But she only got here a few minutes ago, she rode up with me on the elevator. Said she was told her sister had had an accident, but when

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she got to the hospital nobody knew anything about it. Crank call, I guess."

A lightbulb came on in Fenton's head. Even as his eyes followed the guard's pointing finger, he knew what he would see. Sure enough, the Nancy Westbrook now being interviewed looked nothing like the woman Byrd had spoken to earlier. This woman was short and blond. There was no sign of the imposter. Once again Fenton blew out a sigh.

The mayor had come to the same conclusion. "One of the other candidate's people?"

"Who knows?" Fenton said. "Hired by them, maybe. I should have been suspicious—she was almost whispering when she told us her name, and I'm sure nobody questioned the fact that she was at Westbrook's desk. New volunteers are all over the place here." They watched together as the real Ms. Westbrook sagged into a chair. Like everyone else associated with Byrd's campaign at the moment, she looked shellshocked. "I think the opposition must've known Tally pretty well," Fenton added. "Well enough to know how he'd react, anyway."

"I'm glad *I* know too, now," the mayor said. He tipped his head toward the safe and those working on it. "Would you bet on a man like that to run your state?"

Fenton gave him a glum look. "I might bet on him to run the hundred. He's pretty spry for his age."

Neither of them spoke for a while. Political suicide, never pretty, was always fascinating, and every eye was watching the commotion around the safe, the stoppered bottle that held the evil genie. Freddie tried to imagine the coming storm: national outrage and ridicule, assault charges, probably even demands for repayment of mob funds. A public hanging was not out of the question.

Finally he added, as if to himself: "I wonder if the other side needs a good PR advisor."

The mayor pulled his overcoat on. "You might do well there, Freddie," he agreed, his face solemn. "Their candidate's a real workaholic. I've heard he almost never sits down." He tapped his nose and grinned.

At the back corner of the room, the welder was almost done. Fenton heard someone mention that there was no real hurry, since the safe had tiny airholes in the bottom. Talmadge Byrd, of course, hadn't known that, and Fenton wondered idly whether Byrd had filled his shorts after opening Sherry Jackson's purse in the pitch darkness and finding no oxygen canister. He hoped so.

Closer at hand, the new and improved Nancy Westbrook was dazedly taking down campaign banners and posters. Fenton wondered if they were recyclable. After a pause he got up and trudged over to help her, and she gave him a tentative smile. Her eyes, he noticed, were a brilliant blue. He began to feel a little better.

Forty feet away, there were anguished shouts from inside the safe as the torch cut through the last of the door.

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# ELIMINATE THE MIDDLEMAN

## JOHN H. DIRCKX

On a Monday morning in May, Ivor Swedlin drew up the blinds in the front window of the About Face Coin Shop and cast a predatory eye over the passersby. It had rained a little during the night, but by now the sun had dried off the tables and chairs outside the Crystal Pool New Age Bookstore next door, where the yuppies and tourists were just starting to gather for midmorning coffee.

Swedlin made the rounds of the glass cases with a scrap of red flannel, rubbing out fingermarks here and flicking away dust there. With a few deft touches he redistributed the coins more symmetrically in the open trays, which contained only worn francs and nearly defaced Indian head cents that he could afford to lose to the odd sticky-fingered adolescent.

When the bell on the front door tinkled, he looked up to greet the first customer of the day—a solitary male in a maroon golf shirt and tan slacks, suave and sedate, somewhere between retirement age and senile decrepitude.

"Morning, sir. Help you with anything special?"

"Just looking, thanks." The man began strolling among the cases, his gaze sweeping lazily back and forth with apparent indifference. Was he really so lukewarm toward the idea of investing in rare coins, or was he a rabid collector hiding his passion behind a carefully cultivated façade of boredom?

Swedlin let him look in silence for thirty seconds, no more. "You're a collector, sir. I can tell that just by the twinkle in your eye." Swedlin was a compulsive talker, adept at carrying on one-sided conversations on any topic, from his merchandise to his medical history. Mostly he fancied himself as a born salesman of the psychological school. "The true connoisseur never lets go of a coin," he announced.

"I wouldn't say that. What about yourself? You let go of them, don't you?"

Ivor Swedlin shrugged expressively. "A man has to live. I'm a coin broker, for my sins. But I don't let just everything get away from me at market



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prices. I've got some near-fine gold coins—U.S., France, Spain—if you'd be interested in investing in a sure thing. Like to see them?"

The customer admitted to a certain amount of interest in the suggestion. Swedlin pulled a ring of keys from his pocket and went to the basement. Less than a minute later he returned, shaking and gray, and looked right through the man in the maroon shirt as he made his way to the phone.

Detective Sergeant Sandra Moffat swept the dark corners of the basement with her flashlight and sniffed at the mildewy air with distaste. "When was the last time you were down here before this morning?"

"I don't know, maybe Thursday. There was never anything down here but that safe, which I would guess weighed half a ton." Swedlin was tall and round shouldered, with a pencil line of graying mustache that did nothing to correct the impression of mediocrity conveyed by his highly undistinguished features. He shook his head in the general direction of the place where the safe had stood and the shattered door to the outside through which it had obviously been abstracted. "It must have taken six men to get it up those steps."

"Or maybe three or four women." Moffat was mostly muscle and all business. Colleagues who slipped up and called her Sandy were unlikely ever to repeat the mistake. "Anything in the safe besides coins?"

"A few papers."

"Do you have a list of the coins, for insurance purposes?"

"Not complete."

"I need a copy of whatever you have. What about pictures?"

"Of the coins?"

"There's a stolen coin registry on the Internet, but they want digital pictures of whatever's missing. Call your insurance company as soon as we leave. I'll give you a copy of my site report."

Patrolman Bystrom came down the stairs from the shop two at a time and used his flashlight to examine the doorway leading to the outside, which had formerly been barricaded with a redoubtable but obviously ineffectual assemblage of iron and wooden bars, chains, and padlocks. "Looks like they just chewed the door up from outside with crowbars, Sergeant. The door and the frame are both rotten."

"Any evidence left out there? This could be three or four days old."

"It's a dead-end alley. Plenty of footprints in the mud, and you can see where they rested the safe on the ground before they loaded it. They probably had a closed truck with a powered tailgate."

"Better hang some tape till a tech gets here."

"That's done."

Within an hour, an evidence technician took numerous photographs of the crime scene and made casts of footprints left by the thieves in hard

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mud and tool marks left in soft wood. He found no usable fingerprints. By noontime, Moffat had met with her immediate superior, Lieutenant Howell Dunbar, and local dealers and sometime fences were being circularized to watch for some of Swedlin's more distinctive coins.

In addition, public appeals for information about the missing safe or its contents were broadcast on the evening news on radio and TV and submitted to the newspapers.

The first legitimate response to these appeals came two days after the discovery of the burglary when Marysue Bridgeman called Public Safety to report that a friend and classmate of her ninth grade son had recently been showing some old coins at school. Moffat and Bystrom, both skeptical as to the relevance of that fact, waited until afternoon to visit the Bridgeman home so that Dennis would be home from school.

"Dennis doesn't want to be a tattletale," said his mother, "but I've tried to make him understand that this is different—that we all have a duty to our fellow citizens to report serious crimes." Mrs. Bridgeman was creeping up on forty and hating every minute of it. She had a pale, heavy brow, far-seeing eyes, and a determined mouth as straight as a sword slash.

Dennis, summoned away from the screen of the family computer, admitted with evident reluctance that his friend Alex had recently acquired some old coins—dimes and quarters from the 1960s.

"Both of Alex's parents work," said Mrs. Bridgeman. "He's unsupervised most of the day, and he just runs wild, especially during the summer. I don't think he's ever really been in trouble, but his older brother and sister have."

When Moffat checked at headquarters she learned that Alex Pollion, age 14, had never appeared in juvenile court. Any account of minor brushes with the law would have been expunged from the records after ninety days.

Moffat and Bystrom found Alex at home by himself, watching television and eating pizza-flavored popcorn instead of doing his homework or playing baseball. He was an ungainly youth whose loosely fitting clothes only emphasized his elephantine proportions.

Moffat showed identification. "Alex, I'm Detective Moffat and this is Officer Bystrom. We want to talk to you about some coins you had at school."

Alex didn't deny that he had the coins, and he didn't ask who had ratted on him. Possibly he already had that figured out. "I thought if you found something you could keep it."

"Sometimes. It's usually not quite that simple." Moffat never stopped smiling, but it was the smile of a tiger at feeding time, and it tended to make the person she was smiling at feel like a chunk of raw meat. "It depends on what you find, and who it belongs to, and how it got where you found it. Can we see what you found?"

Alex took them to the basement and produced, from a cobwebby crawl space behind the furnace, a metal box that had once contained shortbread

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cookies. It now contained four quarters and three dimes with dates from 1954 through 1963. There were also two flat metal rings of shiny brass of different sizes, each with a numbered and perforated tab.

"How long ago did you find these?"

"Saturday, out in the woods."

"In this box?"

"No, that's mine. They were just lying on the ground."

"Anybody with you Saturday?"

"Nope. See, I like to walk by myself in the woods when it's raining."

"These look pretty shiny. Did you clean them up?"

"Yeah, with oven cleaner."

"Can you show us where they were?"

"Sure. But it's pretty far from here."

They waited for him to lock the house and leave a message for his mother. Then, following his directions, Bystrom drove about a half mile to a neighborhood of massive and widely spaced mansions. A dense, unkempt thicket at the heart of the district provided natural privacy screening at the rear of the lots.

A drainage culvert, identified by their guide as the Witch's Ditch, ran through the middle of the thicket, carrying a trickle of muddy water down to a larger stream. The area was thinly littered with scraps of paper and plastic refuse. After leading them several hundred feet along the culvert, Alex pointed to a piece of higher ground, thickly overgrown with wild honeysuckle.

"I saw something shiny up there so I climbed up to see what it was." Deep gouges in the soft mud and loam showed where he had plowed up the steep grade to retrieve the coins. He looked from Moffat to Bystrom as if he doubted whether they were up to traversing such rugged terrain.

They all three made the climb. From the upper edge of the culvert they could see, through the screen of trees and brush, the backs of houses, with arbors, gazebos, and sundials scattered amid neatly trimmed lawns and hedges. For some time they clambered among interlocking vines and branches, turning over leaf mold and probing in the mud with dead sticks, but they found only fragments of brick and rock and what looked like small lumps of coal. They took Alex back home.

"These things could be stolen property," Moffat told him. "We need to hang on to them for a while. You can keep your box. I'll give you a receipt, and if it turns out the coins aren't stolen and nobody claims them, you'll probably get them back. That might take a few months."

It took Moffat only a quick phone call to determine that the quarters hadn't come from Swedlin's safe. The matter was briefly discussed next day at morning report, and Alex's finds, now in a sealed and labeled plastic bag, were passed around for inspection.

"You know what these rings are, right?" asked Lieutenant Dunbar, who

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plainly believed that he alone possessed that information. "They're gauges that jewelers use to size fingers. Each one of them has the size marked on it, and a whole set, maybe a dozen or so, are strung on a cord or a wire. Does Swedlin handle jewelry, or just coins?"

"He had some folding money and stamps," said Moffat. "No jewelry."

Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn looked up from his inspection of the articles in the plastic bag. "Did you see any holes in the ground around where these things came from?" he asked Moffat.

"You mean like where somebody had been digging?"

"No, I mean like where some*thing* had been digging."

"Critters? Could be. It's pretty rough ground."

"Because I'd bet anything that a groundhog brought this stuff up while he was digging a tunnel. They do that."

"You a country boy, Cy?" asked Lieutenant Dunbar in a faintly mocking tone. Although he and Auburn were both African American, banter and badinage between them were permissible in only one direction.

"I worked on a farm one summer. We used to find rocks and rusty screws and chunks of broken glass and china around the openings of groundhog burrows."

Dunbar nodded at the coins and rings in the bag. "So do you think a groundhog got into some buried treasure here?"

"No, I think a groundhog found a corpse that wasn't buried in a coffin and that had some loose change in its pockets."

"Oh, come on, Cy. Just because you haven't got a homicide investigation on the front burner, you can't steal one of my burglaries and turn it into a murder. And if there *is* a body buried there with coins from the sixties in its pockets, the chances are that the killer is also doing the eternal horizontal somewhere by now."

"Maybe he's got something, though, Howell," said Auburn's superior officer, Lieutenant Savage. "How would you explain seven coins, all more than forty years old, suddenly turning up in one place in the woods?" He turned back to Auburn. "Why don't we check on the history of that area with the county engineer—find out what was there back in the sixties? And maybe get an opinion from one of the naturalists with Parks and Recreation on this groundhog thing?"

As soon as report was over, Auburn phoned Matt DeWessel, a ranger at Megarry Bog with whom he had worked on a homicide a year earlier. Earnest and scholarly, DeWessel remembered Auburn and gave him a mini-lecture on the digging habits of groundhogs.

"They usually burrow just a foot or so below the surface, and they always stay above the phreatic layer," he said.

"Above the which?"

"That's basically the same as the water table—the level you have to get below if you want to dig a well, and the level you have to stay above if you want to avoid seepage in an excavation. The burrows always have side

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passages and more than one opening to the surface. This is the time of year when groundhogs clean out their burrows. Around the main opening you'll usually see a pile of earth and stones and anything else they come across down below. We often find animal bones, even though groundhogs are strict herbivores."

That afternoon Moffat and Auburn met with the county engineer, Hobart Lukasiewicz, at his office in the courthouse annex. From some subterranean vault Lukasiewicz resurrected huge dusty maps and plans so as to trace the history of the Witch's Ditch and its environs. From the 1890s to the 1940s, the place where Alex Pollion had found the coins had been the site of the Erskine Brothers' Foundry, which manufactured brass faucets, valves, nozzles, and couplings. During World War II a devastating fire, thought to be the work of arsonists or saboteurs, had wiped out the business.

In 1963 the property, now within the city limits, was cleared and developed as an upscale residential neighborhood. The ruins of the foundry, including brick, stone, burnt timbers, and rusty furnaces, had been leveled and tumbled into the cellars.

"And that put the kiss of death on that land as far as building was concerned," said Lukasiewicz. "Even if Hannevelt, the developer, had wanted to put houses in there without basements—which they didn't—they couldn't have started building until they'd dug up all that rubble and hauled it away. Think how much underground stuff you've got around a house—your electric power supply, your telephone lines, your TV and computer cable, gas, water, sanitary sewer, storm sewer—it goes on and on."

Auburn looked up from his notes. "So back in the early sixties this area was what—pretty much deserted, abandoned?"

"Pretty much that. Probably an unofficial public dump. And overgrown with weeds, brush, small trees." Lukasiewicz referred to the map. "There might have been some paved roads on the foundry property, but the nearest public street was Mangrove Avenue, and the nearest buildings were Hildreth Methodist Church and these houses running south from it."

Since the coins found by Alex Pollion appeared to have no relation to the burglary from Swedlin's shop, Moffat's and Auburn's investigations now diverged. After lunch Bystrom took Auburn to the Witch's Ditch.

The ground along the bottom of the culvert was still soggy from Saturday's rain. Climbing to the rim meant slithering up a slope plastered with dead leaves and fumbling over the trunks of fallen trees while navigating a labyrinth of wild honeysuckle. Some of the bushes were in blossom, their sickly sweet scent attracting bees, whose buzzing was louder than the distant hum of traffic. Under the leaf mold the ground was virtually paved with shards of coal or coke and lumps of glassy slag from the foundry furnaces.

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Up near the brink of the hollow, where the coins had been found, yawned an unmistakable groundhog burrow, which Moffat and Bystrom, city slickers both, had completely overlooked. The ground around the hole was strewn with freshly turned-up earth, small stones, and a few one-inch-square unglazed white ceramic tiles. Auburn had brought a gardening trowel and some specimen containers in a canvas bag. Bent double under the twining branches, he began sifting through the rubble and immediately found another finger-sizing ring, possibly thrown up since Moffat and Bystrom had searched there three days earlier.

The undergrowth was denser here on level ground, where the sun reached it more evenly. With some difficulty, Auburn and Bystrom pushed their way through the last few feet at the edge of the thicket and stepped out onto a shaded lawn to get their bearings. Between them and the rear of a slate-roofed and nobly proportioned house some hundred feet away lay a veritable Garden of Eden, embowered by tall hedges and well-tended shade trees, adorned with formal gardens, ornamental walks, and a sundial, and peopled by birds and squirrels.

"I think we just landed on the Gold Coast," remarked Bystrom.

"What these people pay their landscape service every month," said Auburn, "would probably keep me in groceries for a year. By the way, don't make any sudden moves." He had just made the disconcerting discovery that someone in the house was observing them with a pair of binoculars. A half-dozen yellow finches crowded around a feeder on the patio, but the binoculars were trained steadily on the two human intruders.

They walked across the lush green lawn to the patio. The man who had been standing in the glassed-in porch stepped out to meet them, his binoculars still held at the ready.

"Afternoon, sir." Auburn showed identification. "Sorry if we're trespassing."

"Something wrong back here?" He was elderly and testy, with hearing aids concealed in the side pieces of his glasses.

"We're not sure. Is this your home?"

"Yes, it is."

"How far back does your property reach?"

"Just to the woods."

"What's your address here?"

"Two six zero Debussy Court."

Auburn made a note on a file card. "Could I get your name, sir?"

"Everett Battelle. Why the third degree?"

"Just a routine investigation, sir. Have you seen or heard any unusual activity back there in the woods lately?"

Battelle peered at Auburn through thick glasses like a couple of spotlights. "Can't see or hear much of anything anymore," he grumbled. "Sometimes kids get down there in the ditch at night and whoop it up. Haven't heard anything in the past few months."

"How long have you lived here, Mr. Battelle?"

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"Not quite forty years. We built here when this was all just a wilderness of mud and weeds."

"I guess that was after they knocked down the remains of the foundry?"

"Oh, the foundry. Yes, they buried that, all right. About two inches down. Anywhere you dig back there you can find a bucketload of coal."

"We may be digging for more than coal," said Auburn, "but not on your property."

Later that afternoon he discussed the question of digging with Lieutenant Savage. The idea that the coins and finger-sizing rings had been buried in the pockets of a homicide victim several decades ago appealed less to Savage than it did to Auburn.

"We could go on digging out there for weeks, chew up the whole neighborhood, and not find anything. And it's not the kind of investigation you can keep under wraps. As soon as a couple guys with shovels walk in there, the president of the neighborhood association will be on the phone to the mayor, and the TV cameras will start grinding."

"What about having Kestrel probe the ground first? If there's nothing down there but bricks and rock, there's no use tackling it with a shovel."

"No, and we're sure not going to blast just to look for a body that's probably not even there. Or have you got some idea who it might be?"

"No particular ID in mind yet. Somebody connected with rings. I thought I'd check the newspaper files back around sixty-three for a missing jeweler."

"Okay, Cy, but the city isn't paying you to work on a master's degree in ancient history. Let's hold off on the research till we have a body, okay? Anything else?"

"About those probes . . . would you mind giving Kestrel the order?"

"I can do that. Any current investigations will have to take precedence, though. And if you do start to any actual digging, you'd better alert the coroner's office in case they want to be on hand to deal with any human remains that turn up."

Three days went by before Auburn could schedule the initial search below the surface at the site of the brass foundry. During that interval he learned that Everett Battelle was a retired orthodontist, had recently been widowed, and was currently serving as chairman of the Board of Trustees at the university.

Auburn spent some of his own time at a microfilm reader at the newspaper office familiarizing himself with local history during the years just preceding his own birth.

He read about the space race between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., the assasination of a president, the election of a pope. On the local scene there had been a political scandal in 1963 involving two county commissioners convicted of diverting public funds, and a destructive local flood in the spring of 1964 caused by heavy rains, melting ice and snow, and the failure of the Tippettsville Dam.

On Friday morning he met Sergeant David Kestrel, chief of the forensic

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lab, in the courtyard behind headquarters. Kestrel, in camouflaged fatigues and hiking boots, seemed to be loading enough equipment into his van for a geological expedition to Antarctica.

"Is there concrete or masonry at the surface?" he asked.

"Not at the surface, no. Mostly there are humongous amounts of coal and slag."

Kestrel fixed him with his trademark astringent glare. "What would that be in metric units?"

They drove separately and parked near the bottom of the culvert. On occasions like this, Kestrel's prickly preference for working without an assistant saddled him with the task of transporting all his own paraphernalia. Auburn encountered no resistance when he shouldered a canvas bag of wooden stakes and led the way through the exuberant underbrush. Kestrel followed with camera case, field kit, and various long metal rods.

When they arrived at the site, Kestrel went to work with deep absorption and maddening slowness. First he took pictures. Then he drew up a map on quadrille-ruled paper, orienting the vertical lines to magnetic north. After that, fumbling resolutely among snarled and intertwined bushes and low-growing trees, he drove rows of numbered stakes into the ground at intervals of exactly one meter. He used a pocket level to ensure that each stake pointed straight up to heaven even in areas where the ground sloped. If a stake hit an obstacle immediately beneath the surface he pulled it out and marked the spot with a squirt of red paint.

Even then he wasn't ready to start boring. With a small rake like a child's beach toy he cleared away the surface coating of dead leaves and twigs, large and small stones, fragments of coal and cinders, and scraps of paper and plastic. He found and preserved another finger-sizing ring, a black or navy blue coat button, more ceramic tiles and bits of broken glass, rusty nails, and the jawbone of a small rodent, probably a chipmunk.

Finally he began systematically probing the ground, using a graduated rod with a hollow screw tip of hardened steel at one end and a T-bar at the other. He allowed Auburn to crawl along beside him with the clipboard but insisted on making his own notations on the map, pulling off his leather work gloves and withdrawing a pen from an inner pocket each time with a stereotyped series of movements like an automaton. It soon became obvious that an impenetrable layer of brick and stone underlay most of the area very close to the surface.

But not all of it. As might have been expected, the area where the groundhog had dug its burrow corresponded to a channel or corridor of earth encumbered only by roots and small stones. Kestrel now concentrated on this area, making repeated borings closer and closer together. One of these, arrested by stone at a depth of 41 cm, brought up a scrap of rotten fabric, black or navy blue. The next produced a fragment of bone, probably the tip of a human toe.

Kestrel tapped the specimen into a plastic bottle, laid down the probing

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tool, and carried out his ritual with gloves and pen. Then, instead of putting the gloves back on, he stood up and stretched. "This is as far as I go," he said. "It's time for the coroner to take over." Nothing in his manner, tone, or facial expression indicated whether he was relieved or disappointed.

Bundling up tools, equipment, specimens, and the map, they left the stakes in position, returned to their vehicles, and went their separate ways. Before lunch Auburn called the coroner's office to report his and Kestrel's findings and arranged to meet Nick Stamaty, the coroner's chief investigator, in his office at the courthouse at one o'clock.

When he arrived for the meeting he found that Nick had recruited his eldest son Nick Jr., known in the family as Zouni (short for Zouzouni, meaning "gnat" in Greek) to help with the digging. The nickname no longer fit as well as it had when Auburn had first met Zouni, who was now on spring break from his sophomore year in college.

"What's this, Zouni? Is your dad trying to get you to follow in his footsteps?"

"I hope not." The boy had his father's dark good looks and gregarious manner, but the lean ruggedness of the soccer player hadn't yet begun to give way to Nick, Sr.'s middle-aged rotundity. "Dead people are so boring."

"That's where the art of the investigator comes in," said his father. "You've got to learn how to make them talk to you."

"I don't know how much talk we're going to hear today," said Auburn. "We may not find anything but a couple of bones. And, by the way, Nick, if you wear that suit where we're going, the underbrush and thorns are going to rip it to shreds."

Stamaty changed into a yellow coverall and filled a thermos with espresso from a machine on the credenza behind his desk. They loaded a pick, a hoe, two spades, pruning shears, and an adze to cut roots into his van, along with the standard complement of body bags and specimen containers. Then they proceeded to the site of the burial with Auburn leading in his car. Zouni carried most of the tools on the trek through the culvert.

They found everything as Auburn and Kestrel had left it two hours earlier. Stamaty paused at the edge of the staked-off area to catch his breath and get his bearings. "I'm surprised Mastermind didn't hang around," he said, "to make sure I don't steal any of his sticks." Stamaty and Kestrel had never quite agreed on anything for as long as Auburn could remember.

They cleared the heavier growth of weeds and brush away from the area of interest and then turned Zouni loose with pick and shovel. Only three or four inches of loamy topsoil had formed here since the foundry had been plowed under and the area allowed to evolve naturally. Below that, the ground was a dense aggregation of broken brick and stony rubble imbedded in tough clay.

As Zouni approached the level where Kestrel had made his crucial findings, he started shaving away thinner layers of earth with the hoe. By the

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time the first white bone came to light, all three investigators were down on their knees in the dirt working with gardening trowels. They were so engrossed in their quest that they didn't hear anyone approaching through the culvert.

"What are you guys doing here?"

They looked up to see a heavy man in his sixties with a seamed, weather-bronzed face surveying them and their excavation with tokens of indignation and wrath. He was wearing a broad-brimmed lemon yellow hat, almost a sombrero, and work boots with the laces untied and the tongues flapping loose in the breeze, and he was accompanied by a silent and none too bright-looking flunky.

"Public Safety officer, sir." Auburn showed identification. "These gentlemen are from the county coroner's office. We've found some human remains buried here."

"Whose remains?" He peered into the excavation.

"We don't know that yet. May we ask you to identify yourself?"

"Gregg Hannevelt." He didn't bother to produce any ID. "My company owns this land. And we didn't give anybody permission to dig here." Hannevelt chewed his words like a man gnawing tough steak right off the bone.

"We'll do as little damage as possible, and we'll leave things just the way we found them after we remove the body. But I'm sure you understand that in a criminal case the public interest takes precedence over the rights of private property holders."

"What criminal case? Maybe this guy died accidentally. Maybe he killed himself."

"He didn't bury himself, sir. This is a homicide until proven otherwise."

"You still need clearance to dig. You could be cutting phone lines, power lines—"

"The county engineer's records show no underground lines here."

"More to the point," observed Stamaty Sr., in his suavest manner, "any disposition of human remains not in compliance with public health laws is a criminal offense, and the owner of the property where the remains are found is assumed to be responsible for the violation."

"You guys talk like a couple of two-bit lawyers. And you look like it too." Hannevelt's stooge permitted himself a demure smirk at this sally. "Any remains you find have been right here since before Hannevelt Development Corporation owned the land. Probably some Confederate soldier who shot himself by accident while running away from the Yankees."

"We have good reason to think otherwise, sir." Auburn pointedly turned his back on the visitors and resumed the delicate process of exposing the remains without disturbing their relative positions, while Stamaty recorded each stage of the exhumation on film. Hannevelt and company watched in silence for four or five minutes and then stalked away. "They didn't just happen to turn up here," said Stamaty when they were gone. "No," agreed

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Auburn. "Probably tipped off by Battelle, the neighbor that Bystrom and I talked to this morning."

Gradually the entire skeleton came into view, evidently that of an adult male lying flat on his back. The bones were almost entirely denuded of flesh except for a few shriveled patches. Shreds and scraps of dark clothing fell to pieces when touched. A gold wedding band on the left ring finger, a wristwatch, a mechanical pencil, and more coins from the fifties and sixties had thus far eluded the busy groundhog, whose burrow ran under the pelvis. All these finds went into specimen jars along with rusty metal grippers, buttons, plastic collar stays, and a brass buckle that had turned Kelly green with corrosion. There were no keys among the remains. If the dead man had had a wallet when he went into the ground, it and its contents had entirely disintegrated by now.

The dates of the coins found in intimate association with the skeleton and the absence of charring disposed of any lingering suspicion that the remains might be those of a casualty of the foundry fire in the 1940s. Zouni was the first to see the crack in the right temporal bone as his father brushed loosened earth away from the skull.

By the time they had enclosed the remains in a body bag, refilled the grave with earth and rubble, removed Kestrel's stakes, and gathered up their tools, a substantial group of spectators had assembled. The inevitable TV news crew met them when they emerged from the thicket at the bottom of the culvert.

Nick and Zouni took the skeleton to the coroner's mortuary while Auburn delivered the other articles to Kestrel at the lab on the top floor of headquarters, also returning the numbered stakes. He had noted that the initials A J C were engraved inside the wedding band and that none of the coins were dated later than 1964.

After reporting briefly to Lieutenant Savage he called Ivor Swedlin at the coin shop. No, they hadn't found his safe yet. Would he mind giving Auburn some expert information bearing on an unrelated case?

"In sixty-five," Swedlin told him, "the U.S. Mint quit making quarters and dimes out of silver. Within a few months virtually all quarters and dimes dated earlier than sixty-five had disappeared from circulation."

"Melted down for the silver?"

"No, sir. Well, maybe a few. But mostly squirreled away by collectors. Think about this: in seventy-six, about a generation ago, the mint struck over eight hundred million bicentennial quarters. That's three for every man, woman, and child living in this country now, according to the latest census. When was the last time you got a bicentennial quarter in change at the grocery?"

The dates on the coins appeared to bracket the burial fairly neatly to the year 1964. Auburn went back to the newspaper files for a more focused search, this time on company time and with official sanction. Reviewing records of missing persons might have narrowed the focus still further, but

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police records that old weren't on microfilm like the newspaper files. The mechanics of researching them was infinitely more complex and tedious, even given the clue of the dead man's initials.

Despite a gradual increase in his caseload during the next few days, Auburn had made solid progress by the time Stamaty called him back to report on the forensic pathologist's findings. The probable cause of death was a depressed skull fracture, which could have been caused by a heavy blow, a fall, or an automobile accident. "Of course, that's strictly on the basis of the bones, since that's all he had to go on. And, by the way, our girl Marigold has condescended to schedule an interview."

Dr. Marigold Strauss, the coroner's contract anthropologist, made appointments to suit her own agenda and expected others to fall into line. Considering that she spent most of her time measuring moldy old bones and lecturing to college students who were fighting to stay awake, it seemed odd that she was always in such a hurry, as if she really needed to be somewhere else discussing more important matters with more interesting people.

When Auburn reached Stamaty's office next morning he found that Dr. Strauss was already there, with a pair of designer sunglasses poised in her tousled mop of hair, babbling away like an auctioneer on speed. She noted Auburn's entry with mild disapproval but didn't even slow down in her presentation. Only after considerable acquaintance did one realize that she managed her nonstop talking mainly by repeatedly recycling an enormous stock of infobites.

"Deceased was a male," she said, "about age forty-five, about five feet, nine inches tall. Besides the acute head wound he had an old healed fracture of the left tenth rib. He may have been overweight, because his hip and knee joint surfaces show some unusual wear. The skull conforms mainly to the southern European type—small, smooth, delicate bone structure, moderately high face, blunt orbital margins, flat supraorbital ridges, depressed glabella."

She spread out a sheaf of eight by twelve glossy photos on Stamaty's desk—laboratory shots of the skull from various angles, similar views of a plaster model, and a third set showing the model coated with putty to reconstruct the facial features. The pictures of the actual skull showed a gaping linear crack in the right temple. The restored countenance, adorned with a short gray wig, regarded the viewer with the sedate but seductive charisma of a Jewish psychiatrist or perhaps an Italian violinist.

"What about dental?" asked Stamaty.

"His teeth were basically healthy, but he had just enough amalgam restorations to provide distinctive findings for comparison. Here are Dr. Cannazaro's report and the dental films he took." Cannazaro was the coroner's dollar-a-year forensic dental consultant. "Of course, they're no use unless you've got a possible match in mind. And that also goes for the DNA samples we took."

She shuffled all the reports and photos into a stack and dropped them

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in front of Stamaty like a newsboy tossing the morning paper onto his porch. "So," she said, "to recapitulate, we have a white man around five feet, nine inches tall, probably at least twenty-five pounds overweight, more likely of predominantly Mediterranean stock rather than Nordic or Alpine, who was about forty-five when he died."

"—in 1964," added Auburn.

Marigold Strauss was one of those arrogant, patronizing experts who consider the phrase "intelligent layman" an oxymoron. She frowned as if Auburn had asserted that the deceased was a Republican or a stamp collector on the basis of his cranial index. "That's an inference based on external and accidental evidence."

"Other external evidence suggests he was a jeweler," said Auburn. He removed a file folder from his briefcase, laid it on the desk, and opened it to reveal the black-and-white portrait of a middle-aged man. "This jeweler."

"Who's this?" asked Stamaty.

"Arthur J. Capodeste. He had a jewelry store downtown on Front Street back in the fifties and sixties." Auburn showed him the photocopy of an old newspaper article with the headline, SEVEN DEAD OR MISSING AS WATERS CREST. "He disappeared during the flood of sixty-four."

Stamaty was comparing the picture of Capodeste with Dr. Strauss's reconstruction. "That doesn't explain how he ended up buried out in the suburbs. If it's him."

"It's him, all right. Everything fits—the dates of the coins, the initials on his ring, the finger gauges in his pocket, his unexplained disappearance. I hope to have dental records before the weekend. And he's got a son, if we need to compare DNA."

Suddenly they both noticed that Dr. Strauss had left without saying goodbye.

"You just did my whole job of identifying the remains," said Stamaty. "How'd you put this together so fast?"

"I talked to his wife a couple of hours ago. She's in her eighties—remarried and widowed again—lives in South Carolina. She said Capodeste went downtown on the night of April thirteenth, 1964, to try to salvage the stock from his store, which was right in the middle of the flooded area. She never saw him again."

"Don't tell me—let me guess. She never saw the stock again either."

"You're half right. Some of it was still there when the water went down, but a lot of it wasn't. They found Capodeste's car buried in mud a half-mile south of downtown. If he managed to get any of the jewelry out of the store, it was either washed away in the flood or stolen. Since his body was never recovered, it took his wife years to have him declared dead and settle his estate."

Leaving the task of confirming the identity of the remains in Stamaty's hands, Auburn proceeded to investigate the forty-year-old homicide.

According to Capodeste's widow, he had had no business partners and,

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remarkably enough, no regular employees. He specialized in less expensive articles for the middle classes, did a limited amount of watch repair, ate lunch daily in the back room. A regular churchgoer—in fact, an usher—he was downright upright.

If Capodeste had fallen victim to a looter or an opportunistic robber, the chances of closing the case after so many years were slim. Returning from another unproductive session with the newspaper files, Auburn detoured along Front Street. Even the presumed scene of the crime was now buried in oblivion. Opposite the levee, where shoppers and idlers sat on benches enjoying a day of perfect weather and the sparkle of the sun on the river, a savings and loan built in 1981 occupied the former site of the jewelry store.

Back at headquarters, he found a couple of dusty city directories from the sixties in the reference library and took them up to his office for leisurely study. In the days before the flood of 1964, a row of residences had stood along the river side of Front Street where the levee had later been built up. While the odd-numbered addresses pertained to businesses such as Arthur Capodeste's Bright Future Diamonds and Watches, the even-numbered ones were the homes of the Morrisons, the LaFleurs, the Chapmans, the Sevinsaxes . . .

That last name struck Auburn like a rock between the eyes. An unusual name, but one that he had encountered before. As a child he had accompanied his parents on many a Sunday afternoon excursion northward along a route that passed through the small towns of Wilmot, Stillwell, and Somerset. And on the village square of Stillwell, the names of two establishments standing side by side, Livermore's and Sevinsax's, had impressed themselves on his juvenile memory. Livermore because it was a restaurant, and like all red-blooded American boys Auburn hated liver. Sevinsax's because it was an intriguing name suggesting an ensemble of musicians rather than a jewelry store.

According to the 1960 city directory, three persons named Sevinsax were living at 414 Front Street during that year: Norman, 48, a toolmaker at Quintilian Corporation; Doris, 48, housewife; and Grant, 19, student. The next available directory, from 1967, listed only Norman and Doris. No one by the name of Sevinsax appeared in the current directory or telephone book.

Revisiting the reference library, Auburn found a two-year-old phone book for Stillwell and vicinity. It gave a home address and phone number for Grant Sevinsax, and the Yellow Pages contained a quarter-page ad:

Sevinsax's Fine Jewelry and Watches—Since 1965
Wholesale Prices—Eliminate the Middleman!

The accumulation of temporal and spatial associations was just too much to be due to chance. Auburn felt the blood pounding in his temples as he returned to his office and placed a second call to Valdemar,

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South Carolina. By now Mrs. Parkhurst, formerly Mrs. Arthur Capodeste, had heard from Stamaty at the coroner's office and might be coming to town later in the week. She remembered the name Sevinsax as that of a young man who had lived near her first husband's jewelry store.

"He was studying architecture or engineering or something and he liked to work on old jalopies. He used to hang around the store when he wasn't in class and he did odd jobs for pocket money—shoveling snow, going to the post office, things like that."

"Do you think he might have been helping to salvage things from the store the night your husband disappeared?"

"Oh, I don't know. That was so long ago. And so many terrible things happened then. When Arthur went downtown that night, the water was already a foot deep in some of the streets near the river, and of course all the basements were flooded. Grant—that was his name, Grant Sevinsax—didn't disappear, too, did he?"

"No, ma'am, apparently not."

"Do you think he had something to do with . . . what happened to Arthur?"

"It's impossible to tell at this point in our investigation, Mrs. Parkhurst. We're still gathering information. Thanks for your help. I'll stay in touch."

One of Lieutenant Savage's principal functions was to throw cold water all over theories spun out of sheer coincidence and pure inference by his subordinates. With respect to Auburn's developing notions about the Capodeste murder and its consequences, the lieutenant performed that function with his usual stern objectivity.

"I don't believe you've got a prima facie case against this Sevinsax," he said. "You aren't even sure he's the same guy. One day last week there were obituaries in the paper for two unrelated women both named Rhonda Booher."

"But they probably didn't both own jewelry stores," objected Auburn, "and live across the street from each other."

"Okay, say it is the same Grant Sevinsax. And say you can prove he stocked his store in Stillwell with merchandise that he stole from Capodeste during the flood of sixty-four. The statute of limitations on felony larceny is ten years."

"That means he couldn't be *prosecuted* for the theft," conceded Auburn. "But if the theft could be proved against him, it would provide corroborative evidence for a murder charge. And there's no statute of limitations on that."

"I don't know, Cy, I still think you're following a mighty cold trail." Savage glanced at the starkly functional stainless steel clock on the wall of his office. "It's too late to head up there today. Why don't you go to Stillwell in the morning and just nose around? Don't bother to apply for a warrant, though—you won't get one."

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Livermore's Restaurant, now designated a Supper Club, still stood next to Sevinsax's Fine Jewelry and Watches on the village square in Stillwell. Auburn parked in one of the angled spaces on the square, where a crew of volunteer gardeners were weeding and watering extensive and picturesque flower beds.

The shirtsleeved man polishing gems behind the counter with a chamois cloth was too young to be Grant Sevinsax. Maybe a son or son-in-law.

"Yes, sir. What can I show you today?"

"Mr. Sevinsax?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sevinsax is no longer associated with the business."

"Are you the owner?"

"Keith Highmore," he said with a broad smile and a courtly nod. "I took it over three years ago. Could I help you with something?"

"Does Mr. Grant Sevinsax still live on Ruysdale Road?"

"As far as I know. Like I said, he's no longer associated with the business."

Auburn got directions to Sevinsax's home address. The house was a modest red brick lost in a forest of conifers. Grant Sevinsax himself came to the door, a big man in his sixties with thick glasses and a face as round and flat as a Frisbee.

Auburn showed identification. "I hope I'm not interrupting something, sir. If you've got a few minutes, I'd like to ask you about some things that happened a long time ago."

"That sounds intriguing."

"Just a routine investigation."

They sat side-by-side on a porch swing. A chihuahua no bigger than a cat appeared from somewhere and Sevinsax picked it up with one hand and held it on his lap.

"I believe you used to own the jewelry store downtown?"

"For almost forty years. Just got to be too much of a hassle with these cataracts, especially after my wife died."

"How did you happen to go into that business?"

Sevinsax massaged the dog's neck and looked off into the distance with his cloudy eyes. "I wouldn't say I just *happened* to go into it. It was something I wanted to do ever since I was little. I took some courses in gemology, jewelry repair, watch repair . . . borrowed some money . . . rented a store . . ."

"It must take quite a cash layout to stock a jewelry store from scratch."

Sevinsax's smile threw his face into a hundred wrinkles like an old-fashioned cartoon of the Man in the Moon. "That's what everybody thinks. Actually an independent jeweler can arrange to pay the supplier just a percentage of the wholesale price of an item until he sells it—sort of like leasing it, or buying it on time. And since the retail markup on jewelry is at least a hundred percent, cash flow is very seldom a problem."

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"So you didn't have to buy anything outright when you first opened the store in sixty-five?"

"Fixtures and equipment, sure. I remember I bought a reconditioned typewriter for fifteen dollars. But jewelry and watches would all have been on credit back then. Is something wrong at the store?"

"Does the name Arthur Capodeste mean anything to you?"

"Surely does. He had a jewelry store across the street from where I lived when I was a kid. He used to let me clean and oil watches—adjust the time if it wasn't too far off. That was a long time ago, before quartz watches with batteries."

"Do you know what happened to him?"

"The poor guy drowned in a flood. As far as I know they never found his body."

"We believe we've found it now."

Sevinsax put the dog down on the porch and twisted to face Auburn. "After all these years?" he asked. "How could they identify remains that old?"

"The identification part was easy. It's the circumstances of his death that concern us. He was apparently killed by a blow to the head and then buried by the killer in the ruins of an abandoned factory."

"Are you serious?"

"His widow will be coming up from South Carolina in a few days to arrange for a proper burial."

"Roselle is still alive? She must be nearly ninety."

"She and I are hoping you'll help us clear up what happened to him."

"Me?"

"Yes, sir. Since you were at the store helping him to salvage merchandise from the flood the night he died."

There was plenty of case law to support the validity of a confession obtained by deception and subterfuge—in plain English, by lying to the suspect. Even the Miranda doctrine was beginning to crumble under continuing judicial assault. But those questions hardly arose here, since Auburn was, in Savage's phrase, just "nosing around," and had no witnesses to back up his report of whatever Sevinsax might say.

"That's what I call plainspeaking," chuckled Sevinsax, his features again disappearing amid a jumble of furrows and wrinkles. "You're accusing me of killing Art and stealing his stuff to stock my own store. Aren't you?"

"I wouldn't say I'm *accusing* you of that."

"But it's the same thing. Okay." Sevinsax stood up and pulled a ring of keys from his pants pocket. "I hope you're not allergic to dust, because it so happens that I still have every order and invoice from the store, going all the way back to day one. I can show you where I got every piece of stock in that store the day we opened. And, by the way, the night the flood peaked I was helping my folks move things into the attic."

He led Auburn along a graveled walk to a detached garage, actually a

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small barn, and unlocked a side door. Dust lay thick on old furniture, car parts, a row of oak filing cabinets. Sevinsax put on overhead lights to augment the daylight straggling in through grimy window panes and began rummaging through the first of the filing cabinets.

No one displays perfect judgment at all times. Life is a perpetual balancing of advantages and disadvantages, risks and benefits. Even the "laws" of science are now recognized as mere statements of probability. When Auburn found himself staring down the barrel of a large-caliber revolver, he knew he'd committed a large-caliber boner.

"Routine investigation my foot," said Sevinsax. "The whole story about finding Art's body was on TV three days ago. Since then I've been sitting around wondering how far the cops would get with their investigation and what they'd do about it. Surround the house, call me out with a bullhorn, tear gas . . . ? And instead of that they send one lone amateur."

Everything about the man had suddenly changed, from his tone of voice to the set of his chin. Auburn supposed that anyone who made a living by selling luxury items would develop a flawless veneer of servile politeness and amiability. He now saw that veneer crack away to reveal a violent, impulsive, unscrupulous man who had lived for forty years with a cold-blooded murder on his conscience.

"Get your hands up, lone amateur. And get away from that window." Sevinsax switched off the lights, plunging the interior of the building into gray gloom. "I think Art had a heart attack. We were up to our knees in water and all of a sudden he went down. I saw all that stock there—rings, pendants, diamonds, watches, watchbands—mine for the taking as soon as he drowned. But he wouldn't drown. He just knelt there thrashing around in the water. I told him I was going to go for help, but I got the crank for the shutters instead and hit him in the head with it."

As if the recollection of the murder had revived an old homicidal ruthlessness, Sevinsax's voice turned into a snarl of wrath. "Keep those hands up. You're not walking out of here."

Auburn struggled to stay calm. A person caught up by a violent emotion like road rage or blind panic doesn't think ahead, doesn't weigh the consequences of his actions, and is therefore infinitely more dangerous than the cold, calculating criminal. At this moment Auburn's number one priority was no longer to clear a forty-year-old homicide but just to keep from becoming the next homicide victim himself.

"Sir," he said, "the statute of limitations ran out years ago on the theft of that jewelry. Like I told you, I'm here to get information, not to make an arrest."

"Save it. I don't con that easy." Sevinsax was slowly approaching him through the gloom. It was evident that with his impaired eyesight he was very much at a loss in the darkened garage. Auburn started edging away into deeper shadow, keeping both hands high above his head. Then, gripping the right cuff of his jacket with his left hand, he worked his right arm

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and hand slowly and silently down and out of the sleeve.

While his opponent thought he still had both hands in the air, Auburn's right was touching the butt of his service revolver. But drawing his own weapon would only even up the odds, and at such close quarters even a blind gunman might hit a vital spot. Auburn waited until Sevinsax was about to reach inside his jacket to relieve him of his revolver. With a lightning movement his right hand shot out of concealment and gripped Sevinsax's gun hand, twisting it violently away from him, trapping Sevinsax's trigger finger painfully inside the trigger guard, and incidentally discharging a round into the garage wall.

He disarmed and cuffed his raging prisoner with practiced dexterity. But it took him three attempts to dial headquarters on his cell phone.

The safe stolen from the basement of Ivor Swedlin's coin shop was discovered about a week later amid yard trimmings, old tires, and rusting appliances in an area posted $200 FINE FOR DUMPING. The thieves had evidently tried to "peel" the safe by caving in the door with a sledgehammer so as to permit insertion of a wrecking bar under the edge opposite the hinges. But it had so successfully resisted this and other assaults with a variety of implements that Swedlin, summoned to the scene with the key, found its cache of gold coins and documents intact.

When he learned what it would cost him to have the safe moved back to his shop, he decided to leave it exactly where it was. The city's attempts to collect a dumping fine from him have thus far been thwarted by his lawyer, whose fees now amount to more than a thousand dollars.

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# AFTER THE DREAMTIME

## JANET E. IRVIN

By the time she reached the interstate, Dani Quillen was out of options. She pulled her faded blue Camaro into the rest stop just west of Falls Creek, Pennsylvania, right behind a chartered bus carrying a group of retired schoolteachers home from a sightseeing trip to New York City. She discovered this by accident when one of the women, a grayhaired talker in a baggy red gym suit, dropped her purse on the wet sidewalk and Dani, dizzy from lack of sleep and shaking from the adrenaline rush, tripped over the woman's billfold. She didn't have to stop, but she did. When she squatted down to help, the fear riding in a ball just below her rib cage smacked into the knife riding her hip. It was a six-inch switchblade with a mother-of-pearl handle. She'd lifted it from Pedro's backpack right before she did Mrs. Freitman.

"Headed home from college, dear?" the woman inquired, stuffing tissue packets, lip balm, and chocolate bars back into her oversized granny bag.

Dani choked down a sob. Granny bag. Just like the one Mrs. Freitman carried. Huh. Dani nodded.

"Something like that," she said.

The woman pointed at the initials PSU riding across the front of Dani's chest. "Penn State. Good school."

"Yeah," Dani mumbled, flashing back to the classes she had started to take. Spanish. Philosophy. Anger Management 101. Yeah. She helped the woman stand and stared at the woman's wristwatch, the dial glaring red numbers at her. It was ten minutes after midnight.

The woman settled her purse on her shoulder and headed into the rest stop. Dani followed her. She really needed to use the facilities but decided against waiting in the line that coiled out the women's side of the shelter. Instead, covering her mouth to hide a yawn and the tooth Mrs. Freitman chipped when she swung her bag, Dani went for the coffee machine. The keys dangling from her scratched brass key ring chattered as she walked. Car, apartment, fraternity house, suitcase, safety deposit box. Her life in faux silver and gold. Her former life.

Slipping the ring over her finger, she pulled a dollar bill from the wad in the front pocket of her jeans, smoothed it against the side of the machine, and fed it to the DEPOSIT MONEY HERE slot. A waxed cup dropped with a



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Kate Forman

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clunk and settled into the holder. The brown liquid wouldn't be as good as the morning coffee Mrs. Frat Mom served Dani each time she cleaned the house, but it would keep her awake and ahead of the police. *You could go back.* The thought flashed in time with the SOLD OUT light that blinked on above the coffee button, but Dani shook it off. No way she was going back.

One of the two bald men from the bus group wandered over to the map display. He located the pushpin indicating YOU ARE HERE and tapped the glass with his finger.

"Guess this is where we are," he announced, gazing first at the map, then out into the night. Several women strolled over to stare at the small circles of light from the street lamps that punctuated the walkway.

"Oh, look," the taller of them said, "the rain has stopped."

"This the first time you been through this part of the state, boss?" The voice, deep and slightly mocking, echoed in the hollow spaces of the lobby. The bald man swiveled around, nodding his head back and forth like a bobblehead doll. Dani, startled, spilled a mouthful of coffee down the front of her sweatshirt, staining the U a muddy brown. Without thinking, she touched her waist, her right hand feeling for the knife.

"No wait on this side, boss." The voice morphed into a man wearing a yellow vest with the word STAFF written in sideways letters down the front. He sat on a bench Dani hadn't noticed when she came in. The bench rested just below the sign that said MEN, snugged up in a corner and blocked from view by the large map display sign. The man could see everyone who entered. Visitors could not see him. Dani sipped from her cup, glancing up after each swallow, then down again. Even though he was sitting, she could tell he was taller than she was. She'd had some experience with legs too long to fit into restricted spaces. Like bus seats. And jail cells.

The man had his arms splayed out along the back of the bench railing. His pants, gray and too short, pulled up at the knees, revealing a pair of dingy white sport socks and four inches of hairy leg. He tilted his head backward, his eyes hooded and appraising. His pale blond hair, thin at the temples, flopped across his forehead. Brushing the strands back with one hand, he looked at his fingernails and replaced his arm on the rail.

"No wait on this side, boss," he repeated, speaking to the man. His eyes, when he lifted them to stare at Dani, were a dark, unreadable blue.

Swallowing the last of the coffee, Dani tossed the cup at the wheeled trash receptacle parked next to the man's mop and bucket. She missed. Brown beads scattered across the newly mopped floor. Before she could step toward the cup, the man was off the bench and moving behind her.

"No need to bother, miss," he said, brushing up against her as he threw the cup away, squeezed the excess water from his mop, and rubbed at the stain. "You can get the next one." When his shirt cuff, rolled up to his elbow, rode higher with the strain of pushing the mop, Dani saw the tat-

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too, two cherubs bearing two names that looked like TRACI and COREY above the words MY ANGELS, curling around his bicep. She bobbed her head up to peer, owllike and stupid, into the incomprehensible dark that wrapped the building like a cloak. She'd left her glasses in the car along with her inhaler.

The man passed her again, humming an old Bob Seger song, crooning the words, "I know it's late, I know you're weary, I know your plans don't include me." Lonely. She recognized the wave of longing coming off him along with the scent of his cologne, cheap and strong and full of hope. She felt the squeeze of her lungs, fistlike and grasping, as they sucked for air.

Dani counted to ten. Ten. Her magic number. Ten. Take ten deep breaths, her mother used to say. In the dreamtime. Wasn't that what they called it, the Aborigines in Australia on that program she saw on PBS? The dreamtime, the time before men came into being and screwed everything up. All right. Ten. One–two–three–four–five–six–seven–eight–nine–ten. Take a breath. No headlights. No police car. She mumbled an apology and headed for the restroom.

Only two of the toilets were still occupied. Closing the door of the handicapped stall and wrestling with the lock, Dani ignored the rumbling of her stomach and the ache in her mouth. She tried to unzip her jeans, but the key ring got in the way. Too tired to juggle keys and zipper, Dani slipped the ring off her finger and looked around. Flush against the back wall was a door with a round brass lock at waist height. A grab bar hung on the wall next to the toilet. No hook at eye height. She found it lower on the door and slipped the ring over the bottom prong.

The woman in the next stall coughed and flushed. Groaning, Dani slouched forward, leaning her forehead against the cool silver stall, cradling the chipped tooth in the curve of her tongue. Just one hour of sleep, just one was all she needed, but there was no stopping now. She closed her eyes and the afternoon replayed itself in a series of fragmented scenes. Cleaning the fraternity house in the late August heat. The phone call from the collection agency. The backpacks piled on the kitchen table like an invitation. The knife handle gleaming in a stray line of sunshine. Stretching out her hand just to touch it. To touch the shine and swirl of the colors. To touch the sea. The frat boys, Pedro among them, didn't care if she looked at their things. Mrs. Freitman walking in from the grocery, her bag bulging down like a giant tentacle. Shouts. *You thief!* The bag swinging at her head and the sharp crack as a can or bottle connected with her open mouth. *You're fired.* It just happened. She didn't plan to stab Mrs. Freitman. She didn't plan to take her money.

Out in the lobby, a door banged. Dani jerked forward, bumping her chest against the metal. Damnation! She wiped the drool off her chin and used the grab bar to settle herself on the bowl. Beyond the stall, the rest stop was a pool of silence and Dani a fish drowning in the un-noise. She counted to

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ten again, breathing through the rattle of her chest. Not now. She couldn't say Please God. It was too late for that. She listened. No voices. The rain started up again, first in short, scattered bursts, then a drumming, then in huge, gut-pounding waves.

Dani looked up at the ceiling, tracing the creases and stains from poor drywall work and the occasional leak. She leaned over and looked under each of the stalls. She was alone. At the sink, dabbing cold water on her face and washing her hands, Dani wondered about the bus full of teachers. Would they reach Ohio before dawn? Would she? Above the roof, lightning hissed and thunder rattled like a wild animal. She listened for human noise, his noise, willing her ears to note every tick and hum. Nothing. *The sky is crying.* Stupid thing to think about, her sister Arlene's words that time at the beach, when they'd been caught out walking in the summer storm and huddled by the dune, water dripping into their eyes and down their naked backs. *The sky is crying because we have to leave*, Arlene had whispered into Dani's soggy hair. Drying her hands on her jeans, Dani stood with her back to the wall and calculated. Where was the ex-con who worked the night shift?

**Alaska was too far from sand dunes and sea shells and prying open oysters with a knife. Too far from memory and salvation.**

Ten. Lucky ten. She would count to ten and then leave. Don't look around. Don't stop. Dani picked at the coffee stain on her sweatshirt and felt for the knife. It had its own sheath and a leather hook that slipped easily over her belt, but it was the handle that drew her. The shimmer of the mother-of-pearl. The smooth coolness against the rub of her finger. The echo of sand and sea and childhood.

Dani smoothed her hair back, avoiding the mirror. One quick glance had shown her hair frizzed around her face like a bush and her eyes shiny as sea glass. She had a wild, hunted look. Like the last time she visited the beach, when the shark took the puppy and she stood, shivering and screaming for help. *Don't cry over a dog. It's just a stupid dog.* Her father's words. *Give me the leash now.* Always taking, taking away from her. Never giving.

The ten count was up. She was waiting too long. Dani slipped through the doorway and listened again, scanning the entire anteroom. The echo of loneliness pointed at her like a finger of accusation. Every nerve ending said run. Stepping with care across the clean floor, she reached the exit doors, pushed through them, and stretched her legs across the expanse of sidewalk that unrolled in front of her. Count. Everything by ten. Twenty steps. Forty. She was in the parking lot now. Her car, covered with raindrops, crouched ahead. Smoothing a strand of hair behind her ears, Dani reached for the door handle and her keys. Where were her keys? She searched her pockets, felt around the roll of bills even though she knew nothing could fit next to them, repeated the motion. No keys.

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Pounding her hand on the top of the car, Dani cursed. The bathroom. She was so stupid. She left them hanging on the hook inside the bathroom stall. She stared hard at the building. She would have to go back inside.

Dani had just stepped onto the sidewalk again when she heard it. An engine. Turning, she glimpsed the reflection off the bubble light and a cruiser slid closer down the curve of the highway. Dani stepped faster along the sidewalk, squinting into the edges of the darkness. A stand of trees and bushes filled in the space behind the building. She could hide there. But the cop would wonder about the car. When she yanked open the shelter door, he was waiting.

"Are you as lonely as I am?" he said. His yellow vest was open, as was his shirt, and his eyes stared straight at her breasts.

"I forgot something," Dani said, stepping around him and heading for the bathroom.

The sound of keys jingling brought her around. "These what you're looking for?" He held them up in his left hand while he rested his weight on his mop with the right. Dani frowned and turned to look behind her, out the door through the black swirl of late night. The man lifted his stare from her chest to the door. "He has to lock up the cruiser first," he said, lowering his hand and stuffing the keys into his pocket. "He'll be here shortly. Yes, boss."

Dani hesitated, pulling her elbows closer to her body. She felt the knife then, felt it push at her skin like a rooting animal. The rain started a new riff, making sea sounds as it sloshed off the roof.

"I'll help you," the man said, "if you help me." He straightened and his eyes changed, the lazy sexual suggestion warping into cruel demand. He patted the keys and waited.

"What do you want?" Dani said, shifting her weight and her courage to the balls of her feet. He was her brother Frank talking her into the little robbery that landed her in prison the first time. He was Jake Larry, the son-of-a-bitch who stole her car after she got out on probation. He was Al Dillon marrying Arlene and taking her with him to frigging Alaska and saying Dani was welcome anytime but how could she ever get the money, and besides it was too far from the beach, too far from sand dunes and seashells and prying open oysters with a knife. Too far from memory and salvation.

The man patted the keys in his pocket again and she saw the need in his eyes, the need to see her humbled. He was every swinging dick she ever loved and hated, and this time, by God, she wasn't going to be the one to walk away empty handed. "What the hell do you want?" she said, watching him, his forehead wrinkled with the weighing of odds and the likelihood of surrender.

"The knife," he answered, nodding his head in the direction of her waist.

"What knife?" Dani edged her way toward the bathroom. The man

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shifted his own weight, glancing out the door, licking his lips. The cop must be closer now, on his way, stepping careful as he spotted their two figures through the rain-splotched glass. He'd be wary of them, one hand gripping his belt, the other resting on the butt of his gun. Maybe there were two cops. Out this late, in this remote location, wouldn't be prudent to have just one. But Dani didn't risk a glance. She was almost inside the bathroom door.

"Just say yes and I'll cover for you." He started to mop again, but his eyes never left her face. The door opened.

"Deal," Dani whispered and disappeared into the women's side.

"Evening, boss," the man said. "It's a wet one."

"Evening, Coleman," the cop answered. "Got company?"

Coleman. The name echoed its way into the stall where she crouched, breathing in heavy, wheezing gasps, holding her hand over her mouth to stifle the sound. Her stomach rebelled and she gasped as bile pushed up her esophagus. Bending over the toilet, Dani spit into the stained bowl. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, stood up and reached for the hook. Then she remembered. Coleman had her keys. Lifting the front of her sweatshirt, she checked the knife. It lay smooth against her freckled skin, safe inside its sheath. She pulled the sweatshirt down and angled her head to see if there was a bulge. Nothing. How did Coleman know it was there? She flipped open the bolt lock and heard the footsteps.

"Hello?" The cop was shorter than Dani, only five-six or seven, muscular, the uniform pants stretched taut across her thighs. She blocked the way out.

Dani wiped at her mouth again and moved to the sink. Her hands were shaking. She turned the handle. Water spurted out too hot and she yelped at the contact. The cop stepped closer to her.

"You all right, ma'am?"

Dani nodded. "Just a little light headed," she said, scrubbing at her palms. Was that blood under her thumbnail? "I haven't had a chance to stop." She looked up. The cop stared back at her in the mirror above the sink. "For dinner." She edged her way around the officer and hit the on-button of the hand dryer. The loud whoosh of air cut off conversation, but the cop didn't move. When the machine shut off too soon, the cop, fingering the radio clipped to her right shoulder, watched Dani dry her hands on her jeans.

Dani wanted to touch the knife. The reality of the blade, clean, sharp, firm inside the handle, the shimmery pink translucence of the grip, steadied her.

The cop shifted her weight from one foot to the other but did not stop staring. Dani, creeped out by the woman's narrow face and the intense angle of her eyebrows, hunched her shoulders as she stepped into the lobby.

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"Told you, boss," Coleman said, propping the mop handle against the display case and slipping his arm around Dani's waist. "Got me a new girlfriend." His grip included the knife. He pressed hard with his fingers and the knife ground against her lower ribs, causing her body to angle into his.

"Coleman," Dani said, pushing away from his embrace and blushing.

"May I see your ID, ma'am?" The taller male cop was wearing tinted glasses. Dani couldn't see his eyes. She sensed the female cop's movement before she saw her, sliding with cautious steps along the wall. Checking out the scene. She disappeared into the men's bathroom and reappeared at Coleman's right. "Clear," she said. The tall cop nodded. Dani fished around in her back pocket. She came up empty. "Sorry," she told him, trying out a smile, "I left my purse in the car."

"That your car?" The cop gestured over his shoulder at the parking lot and the Camaro, almost invisible now in the pour of rain that knocked upon the roof.

"She only come by to see if I needed anything," Coleman offered. "She's going to bring me a sandwich from the Mickey D's in DuBois, if they're open, I mean."

"Got an umbrella, Coleman?" the cop said, ignoring Coleman's explanation. "I need to see your license and registration, ma'am."

"I'll take her, Paul," the female cop said. "Umbrella?"

Coleman, humming again, released Dani and headed for the storage room at the back of the women's restroom, the locked door Dani had noticed inside the handicapped stall. They waited, the rain an orchestra swell of cracks and crackles. Dani counted the seconds between lightning bolts. She remembered Mrs. Freitman shouting at her, the bang of the door against the wall as the woman came into the kitchen. *You thief!* The lure of the knife handle, alive, in the sunlight from the window, waving at her like the light on the waves at Myrtle Beach when Arlene held her hand and they searched for sand dollars and the world was an oyster shell of calmness and quiet love. Before the storm that ended the trips to the ocean and the custody battles that ended her belief in the words *I'll always be here for you.*

The rain slowed once more, then stopped. Dani rocked from side to side, backed up and bumped into Coleman, who held out the umbrella. Dani glanced outside and shrugged. The cop waited. Leaning the umbrella against the wall, Coleman slipped one arm around her and dangled the keys in his other hand.

"Guess you'll need these then, honey," he said, kissing her temple and caressing her hip. Dani clutched at the key ring and moved closer to the female cop.

"Officer?"

The woman gestured for Dani to go first. They stepped out into the invisible chorus of dripping trees and rain gutters carrying the tide of the downpour into the storm sewers. The unstarred sky hovered above them. At the car Dani paused to breathe. Yanking at the door, which creaked and

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groaned and opened with a whoosh, she knelt on the seat and cast about in the dark for her purse.

"Turn on your interior light, ma'am," the cop said, holding the door open with her knee, one hand on the call button and the other on the handle of her sidearm.

"Burned out," Dani said, her voice muffled by her sweatshirt that slid up as she bent over. "Here it is." Turning to see the cop staring at her waist. Remembering the knife riding where the sweatshirt didn't cover when she stretched to grab her purse. Lowering herself to the seat, Dani pushed at the purse's magnetic catch and reached inside for her billfold. The cop was still staring at her, waiting, one hand on the radio call button.

"What's that?" The cop lifted her flashlight and pointed it at Dani's waist.

"What's what?" Dani continued to fish around in her purse. Her breathing was hoarse now, the wheezing louder.

"Step out of the car, ma'am," the cop said.

Dani's fingers found what she was searching for. She slipped her hand to her waist, wiggled her hips, made the pretense of tugging something loose.

"Step out of the car, ma'am, now." The cop moved her hand from the radio to her weapon.

"Sorry," Dani gasped, lifting her hand and shoving the inhaler into her mouth. She breathed in the soothing spray of Albuterol. The cop shifted her feet, exhaled, but she did not take her hand off her gun.

"I'm not really Coleman's girlfriend," Dani said. " I just," she took a second hit off the inhaler and counted. Ten. "I just stopped to go to the bathroom." And then she was crying and the cop was trying to calm her and she said, "I just want to go home."

"Where's home?" the cop asked.

"Alaska," Dani said, "I live at the beach." She couldn't see the cop's face, the intense eyebrows lifting, wondering where there was a beach in Alaska, wondering how far exactly it was from a deserted Pennsylvania rest stop to Alaska. She didn't care.

"Here's my license, officer, and my registration." She handed over the papers and settled her head on the steering wheel.

"If Coleman's done something—" the cop began, handing the papers back.

"No, please, I just want to go home." She slid the key into the ignition and waited.

Thunder rumbled above their heads. As soon as the cop nodded, Dani started the car.

"Next time stop somewhere less lonely," the cop said, squinting at Dani's tear-streaked face. She hesitated, Dani's breaths audible over the dripping of rainwater, then thumbed on the radio. "Paul, I'm through here. Tell Coleman—"

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Dani didn't wait. She closed the door, switched on the headlights, and eased the car into reverse. Halfway up the entrance ramp, she noticed. The key ring dangling from the ignition. The dashboard light shining on two keys. Only two. All the others were gone. Damn Coleman! Dani passed the first mile marker after the exit. She passed a semi hauling mail. She passed a second mile marker, a third. Damn him! She felt the ball of anger shift loose and bounce upward. Slapping at the dashboard, she yelled shit in every language she could think of. She passed a sign but was going too fast to read the words. She started counting. By the time she reached ten, Dani still hadn't made up her mind.

At the next exit, she turned north, swung the car around. She found an empty driveway between the Anchor of Hope Church and an Odd Lots. And she waited. When the cop car passed on the highway, heading west, Dani helped herself to another hit off the Albuterol. She felt the rush of power, a tide of high too strong to resist. Keep going. Go back. Her heart did a double rumba. She touched the knife, slid her thumb along the handle, thought about turning herself in. Thought about Alaska. Thought about Coleman unlocking her life with stolen keys. Then she put the car in drive and swung back onto I-80, heading east.

## THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

AUWRLBO, UYJ FOO, LF WXYJG GNO FPLMGOFG WRB ZWLRMJSSOFG GNLRI YJG. XOMYDO L AYJSB TYKO GY BY WRUGNLRI, L HROP NO PWF BOWB—ZYLFYROB WRB BDYPROB WRB BOWB.

—BYDYGNU S. FWUODF

CIPHER: _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

*Solution on page 154*

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# ANY MEANS SHORT OF MURDER

## KATHY LYNN EMERSON

**England, 1579**

"The aim is to send the ball into the opponent's goal by any means short of murder," Bancroft said, slinging an arm around Rob Jaffrey's shoulders.

"Aye," Needham agreed. "The honor of Cambridge is at stake. We cannot let the townsmen of Chesterton defeat us."

"But there must be rules," Rob objected. "Every game has rules."

In company with more than two dozen other young scholars from the university, the three of them swaggered along the Huntingdon Way. The frost-hardened land, some of it still covered in white from recent heavy snowfalls, was almost level. Rob had a clear view of the open fields and fenlands ahead and of the village itself near the river. He'd been told it contained fewer than a hundred hearths, but every man, woman, and child seemed to have turned out for the football match. Most waited at a distance, bundled in woolen cloaks against the cold, but a few had ventured ahead to gawk at the competition.

"There are no rules," Bancroft said. "When the first team reaches the goal, the game ends."

"That one is ours—the gravel pit by the castle." Needham pointed to an ancient structure in the distance, then swung around to gesture the other way. "They will be trying for that stand of trees on the road to Histon."

The two points were widely separated—more than a mile apart. "Do you mean to say that our players will have to take the ball straight through the village?"

At Rob's look of consternation, Needham grinned. "Have no fear. The good folk of Chesterton will have prudently barricaded their houses and shops."

"They'd have done better to lock up their daughters," Bancroft muttered. Rob followed his gaze to a small group of villagers standing by the roadside. Among them were several pretty young women, one of them great with child. She stared back at him before turning to whisper to her companions. Rob had a feeling her comments were not complimentary.



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Needham guffawed. "About to whelp, that one is. She'll not be playing today."

"Do you mean to say that the women join in?" Rob could not hide his astonishment. There were no football matches between parishes in the part of Kent where he'd been raised, but he could well imagine that if there were, his sisters and Rosamond and the other girls in Lady Appleton's care at Leigh Abbey would clamor to participate. Rosamond in particular did not like to be left out of anything.

"Not here," Needham said, "but I have heard they do so in some of the northern parishes. I vow I'd like to see that. Where we throw off our gowns and doublets at the start of a match, I warrant females would be wont to dispense with petticoats and kilt up their skirts as well!"

They'd reached the crowd of villagers now. One man produced the ball, a bladder covered with leather. He identified himself as Thomas Prescott, the village constable. He duly warned one and all against the use of excessive violence, but he accompanied the words with a knowing wink.

Rob expected the game to be vicious. He knew that repeated kicks to his shins would likely make it difficult for him to walk the next day. He'd be exhausted too. The midday sun was high above them now, but his fellows had warned that it might well be dark before anyone achieved victory. Still, it did not appear that more than brute strength and determination were needed to win, and he had both in abundance.

In the last year Rob had grown into his feet. He was tall for his age and brawny and there was little that frightened him. He'd earned the right to matriculate at Cambridge with scholarship. Now he meant to secure the good will of his fellow students by a show of physical prowess.

Prescott threw the ball high. As it fell, both teams scrambled for possession. Long minutes passed before it reappeared from beneath the writhing mass of bodies. Cambridge had possession.

Rob lost all track of time after that. He was soon covered in mud and snow, his clothes dripping. His leather-soled shoes slipped repeatedly on the icy, uneven ground. He lost count of the number of times he was kicked.

None of the aches or pains or bruises mattered when Cambridge players entered the high street of Chesterton. Rob was dimly aware of passing a church and a manor house, but his attention was fixed on the castle ahead. He could almost taste victory. It would be celebrated with loud hurrahs and guns firing, or so Needham and Bancroft had assured him. Both were still beside him. The three of them had bowled over countless opposing players, clearing the way for the Cambridge man with the ball.

Without warning, several Chesterton men slipped out of a side street and came at them from behind. No rules, Rob remembered, and turned to meet the ambush with gleeful enthusiasm. The excitement of impending victory made him cocky. Too late, he saw that one of the newcomers wielded a cudgel.

The first blow struck the side of Rob's head, felling him. He was conscious

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long enough to know that his two friends had also been attacked. Then more blows landed, from both fists and solid English oak, and blackness descended upon him.

"Because I do not want to!"

The voice was petulant, annoyed, and very familiar. Rosamond, the light of Rob's life and the bane of his existence. He'd adored her ever since she'd come to Leigh Abbey as a child to be fostered by Lady Appleton.

He tried to turn his head toward her but a shaft of pain forced him to lie still. He thought about opening his eyes but decided that required too much effort. It hurt to think, too, but he forced himself. If Rosamond was nearby, he must be home, but that wasn't where he was supposed to be. He'd been at Cambridge. Hadn't he?

Struggling to recall made the throbbing in his head worse, but a glimmer of a memory came to him. "Who won the match?" he asked in a voice that sounded rusty with disuse. Then he sank into unconsciousness once more.

The next time he woke, things were clearer and much less painful. He was at Leigh Abbey, and the room—a sumptuous bedchamber once occupied by Lady Appleton's titled sister-in-law—was full of familiar faces. His mother, Jennet Jaffrey, Lady Appleton's housekeeper and longtime friend, hovered near the head of the bed. Lady Appleton herself was busy at a table with mortar and pestle. She was an expert herbalist. No matter how bad her elixirs might taste or smell, Rob would trust her knowledge over that of any physician in the land. And there, standing by the window, was Rosamond.

As if she felt his eyes upon her, she turned his way, a scowl marring her otherwise pleasant features. "He's awake."

"Oh, my poor, dear boy," his mother murmured, taking his hand. "You have been sore injured."

"We feared for your life," Lady Appleton informed him in her brusque, no-nonsense way. "It is good to have you back."

Rosamond said nothing, nor did she come near. It was not until much later, after the two older women had left the chamber, that she spoke to him.

"Fool!"

"Good day to you, too, Mistress Rosamond."

"What were you thinking to take part in such a fray?"

"It is a game, Rosamond. My injury was an accident." In truth, he did not remember being hurt. He could not even recall playing in the match. The last clear memory he had was of walking toward Chesterton.

"Indeed, it was not. You were set upon by louts from the town. They almost killed you."

"Bancroft? Needham?"

"Your friends? Better off than you!" She'd reached his bedside now and stood with hands on hips to glare down at him. "They yelled for help and

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ran off the ruffians who did this to you, for all the good it would have done had you died."

"Well, I did not." He felt as peevish as she sounded. "How did I come to be here?"

"We brought you by cart. Insensible." Of a sudden, she burst into tears.

Rob gaped at her. Rosamond did not cry. She ranted. She raved. She even screamed sometimes. He did not think he had ever seen her weep.

"You have been lying here for nigh unto two months, Rob Jaffrey. We began to despair that you would ever wake."

"Two months!" No wonder he felt weak! He looked down at himself. He was naught but skin and bones. They'd forced liquids down his throat, he supposed, enough to keep him alive.

He tried to sit up. His head spun, but he managed . . . after Rosamond came to his assistance. She smelled sweet. Gillyflowers, he thought. If two months had passed, it must be spring.

The football match had been played on Shrove Tuesday, the traditional time for festivities—feasts, masques, cockfights, and football matches—before the beginning of Lent. This year it had fallen on the third day of March. It must be May now.

He looked past Rosamond's shoulder and through the window. "Why is there still snow on the ground?"

His mother, returning with a bowl of thick broth, overheard the question. Rosamond quickly stepped aside to let her through. The rich aromas of onions and stewed beef made his mouth water.

"It has been a year of omens," Jennet Jaffrey muttered, spooning the first portion into his mouth. "Signs and portents."

He swallowed ambrosia. "What signs and portents?"

"You must have seen some of them for yourself, even at Cambridge." Another spoonful prevented any reply. "There was a solar eclipse. Most frightening it was. And before that, the Thames flooded. Back in February that was. They say fishes were left behind on the floor of Westminster Hall by the flood waters. Then the very next night, there was an eclipse of the moon and then a four-day snowfall that left deep drifts throughout the land. Many people and cattle were lost."

"I recall a storm a week or two before Shrovetide, but that cannot be the same snow still on the ground." He gestured toward the window, wincing when sudden pain lanced through his arm and ribs.

"Indeed it is not." Jennet pressed another portion of broth upon him. "That fell but two days ago. Most unnatural it was. A five hour fall that left snow a foot deep from here to London."

"Mayhap it is a *good* omen." Rob quickly pressed his lips together, lest he eat too much and become ill.

Jennet sniffed back tears. There were more lines than he remembered in her face. Had worry over him done that to her? Rob reached out and patted her hand. "I am better now, Mother. Soon I will be completely well."

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"You were sore hurt," she whispered, setting the bowl of broth aside to free the other hand to brush a lock of hair off his brow. "Your head was broken, and bones as well. Bringing you here was a risk in itself, but the physician who tended you in Cambridge had already given you up for dead."

"I do not remember what happened."

"Just as well."

"It isn't unusual for fights to break out during football matches."

"The game should be banned! Let young men take up archery instead, which may at least be used for the defense of the realm."

"The Vice Chancellor has restricted future play to university grounds," Rosamond put in. "Your mother thinks he should have forbidden such sports entirely."

"It is scarce the game's fault!"

"Then why were you set upon? You had never been in Chesterton before."

Rob's head began to pound again. He sank back against the bolster and closed his eyes. "I have no notion, Mother. Perhaps you are right and the eclipse was to blame."

In succeeding days, Rob slowly regained his strength. Daily visits from his mother, his father—Mark Jaffrey, steward at Leigh Abbey—and Rosamond helped. Especially Rosamond.

She was the only one who wanted to know about his time at Cambridge before the match. He'd entered Christ College the previous Michaelmas as a sizar, the lowest of the scholars, performing menial tasks like bed making, chamber sweeping, water carrying, and serving at table in return for his tuition, room, and board. He had been glad to exchange work for the chance to study. It was not every day that the son of two servants had such an opportunity.

"I am envious," Rosamond declared.

"You'd hate sweeping chambers!"

She stuck her tongue out at him. Sitting tailor-fashion on the foot of his bed, her skirts tucked under her knees, Rob thought she was the best medicine he could have had. When she was with him, he forgot his remaining aches and pains.

But something was troubling her. He could see it in her face when she left off teasing him. He thought she might voluntarily unburden herself, but for once she seemed intent on putting him first. She so skillfully deflected any question that touched on her problems that days passed before Rob realized what she was doing.

Finally, he'd had enough of her selflessness. "What is it you do not want to do?"

She heaved a deep sigh that thrust her bosom forward. Rob had to force himself to focus on her words.

"My mother and stepfather have selected a husband for me."

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Ice gripped Rob's vitals. He did not want to imagine Rosamond married. "Who?"

"His name scarce matters. He is wealthy and heir to a title."

"Have you taken a dislike to him?"

"I have not met him, nor do I intend to."

He breathed again. "Then why so gloomy?"

"They will not stop. I have reminded them that I must agree to any marriage and told them that I do not, but they persist in sending letters. Before you know it, they will descend upon me in person. They will not let me be."

"Lady Appleton told you years ago that you could not be forced to wed."

Rob knew most of the story. Rosamond was a merrybegot, the illegitimate daughter of Lady Appleton's late husband, Sir Robert, after whom Rob himself had been named. Lady Appleton had never held that against her. In fact, Rosamond was Lady Appleton's heir. Furthermore, when she married, she would come into a small fortune set aside from her father's estate.

"It is all very well to *say* I will not wed," Rosamond grumbled, "but as long as no one believes me they will keep at me to fall in with their plans. I am tired of the lectures on my duties as a daughter. They'll not stop. They will only get worse." A calculating look came into her eyes. "Unless . . . "

"Are you sure about this, Rosamond?"

Rob had doubts enough for them both. In truth, he was not quite sure how he had come to be here in a strange church and standing in front of a curate he had never met before. Rosamond had twisted him around her little finger, as always.

"I know what I am doing," she whispered. "Just as I did last night."

Rob felt heat rise in his cheeks. She had come to his bed. They had exchanged private vows and sealed them with consummation. By some lights, they were already wed.

He lowered his voice. "If we go through with this, become legally bound, it will give me complete control of your fortune. Are you certain you trust me?"

"You love me." There was utter confidence in her tone. "You will always strive to make me happy."

In other words, she was sure he'd let her make all the decisions. Rob sighed. She likely had the right of it. What did it matter that he was simply the best alternative she could think of to avoid a betrothal to the man her mother had selected? He'd always loved her. This way they would be together. They'd be bound to each other for the rest of their lives.

He scarce heard the mumbled words of the marriage ceremony. His heart pounded too loudly. But he made the required replies and heard Rosamond do the same. Then they were out in the sunlight, on the church porch with the beaming curate beside them.

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The sound of approaching hoofbeats brought a smug smile to Rosamond's face. "They are too late to stop us."

Dreading the confrontation to come, Rob squared his shoulders and turned to face the riders. Lady Appleton? His parents? It would not have surprised him to see Rosamond's mother and stepfather, all the way from Cornwall, but the two horsemen who hove into view did not look familiar. Indeed, it was impossible to recognize their faces, for they wore wide-brimmed hats, pulled low, and scarves wrapped around the lower part of their faces. Rob's eyes widened as one of them raised a pistol.

He reacted instinctively, wrapping his arms around Rosamond and bearing her to the floor of the porch, shielding her body with his own. He landed hard, the breath knocked out of him. His left elbow struck stone and he lost sensation in the entire arm.

An instant later, Rob heard the explosion as the gun fired. The horses thundered past. As the sound of hooves against hard-packed road faded away, he said a silent prayer of thanks and opened his eyes.

The first thing he saw was Rosamond's face, turned slightly to the side. The second was the pulse at her throat, fluttering rapidly. He could feel the rise and fall of her breathing beneath him and knew she was safe, but her gaze was fixed, her expression one of horror, as she stared at her outflung arm. The sleeve was spattered with red.

Dreading what he would see, Rob levered himself upright, wincing at the pain in his newly healed ribs. It took only a moment to locate the source of the blood. The marksman had not missed, after all. The bullet had struck the curate. He lay unmoving but a few feet away.

The sound of more horses approaching sent a wave of panic through Rob. They were coming back! "Hurry!" He hauled Rosamond to her feet. "Into the church."

He had some notion it would provide sanctuary, though why murderers should honor that tradition he did not know.

Rosamond resisted, pulling free to run straight toward the riders. "Murder!" she cried, grasping the bridle of Lady Appleton's mount. "There has been murder done here!"

Rob's father, Mark Jaffrey, and Master Nick Baldwin rode beside Rosamond's foster mother. Master Baldwin, Rob remembered, was a justice of the peace.

"They went that way." He pointed. "Two men in plain clothing mounted on bays. One had a pistol."

"How long ago?" Baldwin asked.

"A few minutes. No more."

"They are armed and you are not," Lady Appleton called after Master Baldwin as he rode off. "Have a care for yourself!"

Rob's father, torn between going with Baldwin and staying where he was, caught Rob's eye. "Are you wed, lad?"

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"Aye."

"And consummated, too," Rosamond announced, "so it is no good trying to undo what is done."

"Rob is too young to wed without permission," Mark said.

"But I am not," Rosamond answered back. "It is done, I tell you. I could even now be increasing."

Embarrassed by her bold speaking, Rob dropped his gaze and found himself staring at the dead man. "The curate," he mumbled. "He was shot before our very eyes. Why would someone want to kill a churchman?"

"I can think of one or two I'd gladly dispose of," Lady Appleton muttered, but she urged her horse forward to the church steps. She dismounted directly from her sidesaddle onto the porch and circled the body, inspecting it from every angle before declaring that he was, indeed, quite dead.

"You cannot keep me prisoner here!" Rosamond blurted out the words the moment the door opened to admit Lady Appleton, the woman she had called "Mama" for more than a decade.

As soon as they had returned to Leigh Abbey, Rosamond had been whisked off to her own quarters. Rob had been sent to his parents' lodgings on the other side of the courtyard.

"That is true," Lady Appleton said. "I can, however, demand your respect. I have things to tell you, Rosamond. Do me the courtesy to listen."

"Oh, very well. Speak your piece." Rosamond flounced across the bedchamber and flung herself down on her stomach on the bed, burying her head in her arms. "I am listening."

"You have entered into what most would call a misalliance."

Rosamond bit back a retort. Everyone at Leigh Abbey seemed to agree that the daughter of a knight, even an illegitimate daughter, should not lower herself to marry the son of a mere steward.

"In the old days, your union would have been forbidden by the laws of spiritual affinity."

Still silent, Rosamond frowned. It took her a moment to work that out—her father had been Rob's godfather. Well, there was no such prohibition now, and the way she'd heard it, back before King Henry broke with Rome a Papal dispensation could always be had for ready money.

"You have succeeded in thwarting your mother's plans for you," Lady Appleton continued. "You cannot now be forced to marry anyone else."

Face still safely hidden, Rosamond grinned.

"Do not think, however, that you have done well. Jennet, my dearest, oldest friend, lies gravely ill, struck down at the news that her son had run off with the daughter of the house. Are you pleased about that, I wonder? You two have often been at odds."

"I did not mean her any harm," Rosamond muttered, her smile fading.

"No, I suppose not. It was simple thoughtlessness on your part. I do not

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know why I should be surprised by your actions. You have always been headstrong and impulsive."

"If I am such a disappointment to you, I will take myself off. Rob and I can make our own way in the world, now that I have control of my fortune."

"As to that, I fear you do not."

Rosamond sat up. "I know that under the law Rob controls my goods and chattels, but—"

"It is a bit more complicated than you think." Lady Appleton's tone was rueful. "Rob is not yet of legal age to manage his own affairs. If you were married in truth, his father would be the one in charge of your inheritance."

Eyes narrowing, Rosamond stared at her. "What do you mean *if* we were married? We *are* married. We were duly wed by the curate before he was killed. It is wrong for man to put asunder those God has joined together," she added, affecting prim piety.

"And there, you see, lies the problem. At my request our local vicar made inquiries about this curate of yours. It turns out that he was not a clergyman at all, nor did he have the authority to perform marriages. There will no doubt be a great scandal over the matter, for you were not the first couple he deceived."

"Why would anyone do such a thing?"

"You paid him, did you not, to perform the ceremony?"

"An angel." The gold coin had a value of ten shillings.

"That is much more than any honest preacher would charge."

Chagrin at being duped had Rosamond off the bed and pacing, but she was not yet defeated. "Private vows are just as binding. Rob and I said those as well."

"So you did, more's the pity."

Rosamond turned to stare at her. "Our marriage cannot be dissolved."

"And that leaves you in an awkward position." Lady Appleton sighed deeply. "The marriage cannot be dissolved, as you say, but under the law you are not wed. That leaves your inheritance as it was, under my control."

"No!"

"Do you love him, Rosamond? Is that why you wed?"

"I wished to be free!" She shouted the words.

"You *were* free."

"Not to live as I pleased. Not free of Mother's nagging or your rules."

"And now you are a wife, no better than Rob Jaffrey's chattel. Only widows control their own property."

"Rob loves me. He'll never make me do anything I do not want to do."

"And you, Rosamond? Do you care for him?"

"I . . . I am fond of him."

Lady Appleton's eyes locked on Rosamond's in a long, hard stare. "Rob must return to Cambridge. He is a promising scholar. He should be allowed to complete his studies there."

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"If that is what he wants, I have no objection." Rosamond told herself she did not care, as long as she was allowed to go her own way.

Lady Appleton gave a curt nod. "I will speak with the vicar. He can marry you here, at St. Cuthburga in Eastwold, after which Rob will go straight back to Christ College."

Lady Appleton was halfway to the door before Rosamond remembered that another question had been preying on her mind. "Wait! That curate—have the authorities discovered who killed him?" Nick Baldwin had ridden hard, but he'd been too late to catch even a glimpse of the fleeing men.

"Doubtless someone else he'd duped. The fellow performed at least a dozen false marriages in that church, and others before in different places." She shrugged. "I cannot say that the death of a fraud and swindler is a matter that concerns me overmuch."

After the ceremony at St. Cuthburga's, Rob returned to Cambridge. He seemed glad to go. Rosamond sulked. Rob's sisters were no longer speaking to her, even though their mother was back on her feet again. Another of Rosamond's companions had left Leigh Abbey before her marriage, and when news of the misalliance leaked out, the family of the fourth girl Lady Appleton had been educating demanded she return at once to London. She was to leave in two days' time.

"I will be alone and friendless when she's gone," Rosamond complained to Lady Appleton.

That worthy did not even look up from her herbal. "I do not lack sympathy, Rosamond, but you brought this on yourself."

Dissatisfied with that response, Rosamond left the house and walked to the village of Eastwold, a mile and a half way. As she'd hoped, the vicar's wife was more than willing to listen to her woes.

"You have aroused interest far and wide," she confided in Rosamond. "My maid tells me that a stranger was in Eastwold only yesterday, asking about your new husband." She gave Rosamond an encouraging smile, clearly hoping to become the recipient of new confidences.

Rosamond only frowned. She had no idea why anyone would be curious about Rob. And if they were, why come to Eastwold? They should be looking for him at Cambridge. Still mulling over this small mystery, she left the vicar's house and headed back toward Leigh Abbey.

The village of Eastwold was a tiny place, consisting of the church, a smithy, two water mills, an alehouse, a petty school funded by Lady Appleton, and a dozen houses with gardens. The two hundred or so residents, most of them yeomen farmers, went to Dover if they needed anything other than the services provided by a blacksmith, brewer, miller, carpenter, schoolmaster, and vicar.

Rosamond had just passed the forge when she heard the rush of footsteps behind her. She turned expecting to see the blacksmith's wife—

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Rob's aunt. Panic gripped her at the sight of a man with a cudgel. His dark eyes burning with hatred, he swung it at her. Rosamond threw herself sideways, into a field, narrowly escaping a blow that could easily have cracked her skull.

The wind knocked out of her by the force with which she hit the ground, Rosamond could not draw breath enough to scream. Panting, she scrambled to her feet and took off running, stumbling over the uneven ground but determined to reach the safety of the smithy's house. She glanced over her shoulder as she fled.

The man had not come after her. He watched her flee for a moment longer and then stalked off toward his horse. The bay was tethered to a nearby tree.

Rosamond skidded to a halt. A bay? Just like the horses ridden by the men who'd killed the curate? She shaded her eyes, trying to get a better look at her attacker, but he was already riding away. She was left with only the impression of a lantern jaw and her memory of those terrifying eyes.

When she had hired two stout village lads to escort her, Rosamond went home. If the stranger was waiting along the way, intending to ambush her a second time, she saw no sign of him. The only person she encountered was a farmer driving a herd of milch cows.

Lady Appleton heard of the incident the next day. "I think it best that you go to stay with your mother and stepfather for a time," she said. "How fortunate that you will be able to travel as far as London in the company of a friend."

Rosamond started to object, then thought better of it. She'd had an idea.

A week later, the maid she'd hired in London attesting to Rosamond's respectability, she bespoke a room at the best inn in Cambridge and sent word to Rob that she'd arrived. He lost no time obeying her summons, but he brought two friends with him, Bancroft and Needham, and he did not look pleased to see her.

He was even less happy when she told him about the attack on her and her conclusion that the man with the lantern jaw and burning black eyes had also killed the curate who'd married them. "And as he was asking questions about you in Eastwold, he must know by now that you are a scholar at Christ Church," she concluded.

For a long moment the three young men just stared at her. In their identical black robes and caps, they looked much alike. That was the idea, she supposed—make them all fit into the same mold. How dull!

"How can these events be connected?" Rob finally asked. "And why would anyone wish to harm either one of us?"

"The man rode a bay horse."

"Not uncommon," one of Rob's friends put in. Bancroft.

Rosamond frowned at him. He did not look well. Mayhap hearing about

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murder upset him. Dismissing the fellow as a person of no account, Rosamond concentrated on Rob. Somehow, she had to make him see that he was in danger, even if she could not fathom the reason why.

"You have been at the center of three violent events in the last few months," Rosamond said in what she hoped was a reasonable tone of voice. "First you were attacked and beaten—with a cudgel—during a sporting event. Second you were standing next to a man who was shot by a villain riding a bay. Third, a man, with a cudgel, riding a bay horse, attacked me after asking questions about you. These three things are linked together, Rob. You cannot deny it."

Bancroft's skin color went from pasty white to an interesting shade of green, but Needham watched their debate as if he were a spectator at a tennis match. His head swiveled back and forth between them, eyes alight with interest.

"All the more reason for you to go straight back to Leigh Abbey, or on to Cornwall." Rob's face was set in a mulish expression. "It is not safe for you here."

"Nor is it safe for you."

"You were the one attacked."

"You were attacked first!" Faces only inches apart, hands fisted on hips, they were mirror images of each other.

"I am your husband, Rosamond. You will do as I say!"

"Hah! You have no power over me. I have my own money." Each of them had generous allowances, and she had jewelry she could sell if she had to. "One way or another, I intend to stay in Cambridge until I find the answers I am looking for. I will hire henchmen to guard me, but I will not go away."

The staring match continued for a full minute longer before Rob abruptly capitulated. "Four henchmen. Two to be posted outside this door at night and all four to go with you if you venture out into the streets."

"Agreed. I am not so foolish as to put my own life at risk." Impulsively, she caught his face in her hands and pulled him to her to deliver a smacking kiss. "Now tell me—what will you do to protect yourself?"

"I have friends to look out for me."

Rosamond snorted. With that weak stomach, Bancroft would be useless. Needham was a strapping fellow, but he seemed far too easygoing to be of much help.

"They rescued me during that first attack," Rob reminded her.

"Then let us hope they remember more of it than you do." She gestured toward a bench. "Sit down, gentlemen, and tell me everything you can recall. In particular, I wish to know the appearance of the fellow with the cudgel."

"We were too busy fighting for our lives to pay attention," Bancroft said quickly.

"Not so," Needham objected. "She's right, you know, Jaffrey. The fellow did have a lantern jaw."

"I am certain you are wrong," Bancroft said. "I'd have remembered."

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"I will discover the truth soon enough," Rosamond told them. "As soon as I have hired my henchmen, I intend to pay a visit to Chesterton." She cut short Rob's objections by touching her finger to his lips and holding his gaze. "It is safer for me to go. Most people hesitate to attack a woman. Besides, I mean to go directly to the constable with my complaint. I will have the law on my side."

"But you do not know the name of the man with the cudgel," Bancroft objected. "How do you expect to identify him?"

"I anticipate no difficulty." Rosamond's confident smile underscored her words. "After all, how many lantern-jawed men with black eyes and bay horses can there possibly be in one small village?"

"Half the villagers own bays," Constable Thomas Prescott said.

And during the brief time Rosamond had been in Chesterton, she had seen at least a half dozen men with lantern-shaped jaws. She'd ridden close enough to two of them to see that they also had dark eyes, although neither had appeared to recognize her. They'd stared at her with nothing more threatening than mild curiosity.

"The man I seek would have been absent from the village on two occasions." She gave Prescott the dates of the curate's death and the attack on her in Eastwold and had the satisfaction of seeing his expression harden. "A name, if you please."

"Glover by name and glover by trade."

"Will you escort me to him?"

"I do not know which Glover you seek, mistress. There are four sons."

"I believe I will know him when I see him."

Reluctantly, Prescott led the way south from the middle of the high street to the parallel Water Street, beside the river. "The glover's family lives above his shop. It would be best to speak with them there."

"Agreed."

"A moment, then." He left her standing in the street with her henchmen while he made arrangements, returning a few minutes later to escort her up an outside stair. When her guards started to follow, Prescott stopped them. "There is not enough room for everyone. Remain here."

Rosamond tried to object, but Prescott had taken charge. He propelled her into the living quarters ahead of him. Of a sudden, Rosamond found herself facing five lantern-jawed stalwarts, the father as sturdy as the sons, with only the village constable at her back.

She swallowed hard as her gaze roved over their faces. Her breath caught when she recognized the black eyes she'd last seen in Eastwold.

They still brimmed with hatred.

"A more self-reliant female than your lady wife I have never seen." Bancroft sprawled on the window seat, idly watching the ostlers come and go in the courtyard below. "You need have no fear on her account."

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"I should have insisted she let me to go instead." Rob stopped pacing long enough to scowl at his friend. Rosamond had left the inn early that morning and had not returned by the time he and his friends arrived to meet her, as they'd arranged the previous day, at three of the clock. "I dare delay no longer. I must go to Chesterton and find her. Are you with me?"

"That would be foolish," Bancroft objected.

"Why?" Suddenly beset by a terrible suspicion, Rob caught the other scholar by the neck of his gown and hauled him to his feet. "What haven't you told me? Do you know something of this lantern-jawed man?"

Bancroft tried to deny it, but Rob saw through the lie. In disgust, he shoved him away. "I'm going."

"Wait," Needham called after him. "We'll come with you."

"I cannot!" Bancroft yelped.

Slowly, Rob turned. Fixing the other scholar with a steely gaze, he spoke in a tone that warned of dire retribution should he detect another lie. "What are you afraid of, Bancroft?"

"They'll kill you if you go there, Jaffrey. And if they do not, they will kill me!"

This time it was Needham who grabbed Bancroft and shook him. "A woman's life is at stake. Speak, or I'll kill you myself."

"He cannot speak if you do not loosen your grip." Rob's hands clenched and unclenched, so great was his desire to strangle the truth out of Bancroft himself. But even greater was his need to find out what Bancroft knew.

"Do you remember the girl we saw that day?" Bancroft's voice was a hoarse croak. "The one great with child?"

"On Shrove Tuesday?" Rob frowned as a vague recollection came to him. He had seen such a young woman in the crowd.

"She was not married. She'd coupled with a Cambridge scholar and everyone in the village knew it . . . including her brothers."

"She looked right at Rob," Needham said.

Rob's innards twisted. "A look? Do you mean to say that was enough to make them think I was the father?"

"She was trying to protect her lover, to cast the blame elsewhere."

"You?"

A picture of misery, Bancroft nodded.

"Then let us go to that girl at once and straighten out the matter. She knows I am not the one who—"

"She's dead. She died in childbed. And she never told anyone she lied about you. The men who attacked us on Shrove Tuesday might have been content to maim you, but after she died, when they heard you had survived and were about to marry a rich heiress—"

"They came after me and shot the curate by mistake."

"If your wife is right about the bay horses, I fear so. Two of the brothers ride bays. And failing to kill you, they must have decided to seek revenge for the death of their sister by killing someone you care for."

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Rob felt every bit of warmth leech from his body. Without waiting to see if either Bancroft or Needham followed, he raced out of the inn and along the Huntingdon Way toward Chesterton.

When Rob and his friends burst into the glover's upstairs room they found Rosamond sitting at ease with the women of the family, a mug of ale at her elbow and a baby in her lap. She was only slightly surprised by their abrupt arrival. At a gesture from her, her four hired henchmen replaced knives in scabbards and stepped back.

"You will be pleased to know that matter of the false clergyman's death has been resolved." She spoke in a low voice so as not to wake the sleeping child. "One of the glover's sons has confessed to the crime, although I believe the shooting may yet be ruled an accident. After all, he did not intend to kill the curate."

"He tried to kill me. And he tried to kill you."

Rosamond ignored Rob's protest, her attention shifting to his two companions. "Henry Glover has acknowledged his guilt, but he would never have sought revenge at all had someone not meddled with his sister. Which one of you fathered this child and what do you intend to do about it?"

Her gaze flicked from Bancroft to Needham and back again. It skipped over Rob. He had not yet matriculated at Cambridge when the child was conceived. Under her intense scrutiny, Bancroft began to sweat.

"The child is mine," he whispered. "Let me live and I will provide for him."

"You will provide for *her*."

"I will. But . . . but I have to be *alive* to do so."

"Not necessarily, Master Bancroft, but you will remain in good health as long as you make a settlement on the child, in writing and witnessed by the local authorities."

"But—"

"No arguments, Master Bancroft." Rosamond smiled sweetly, certain she had his measure. "To persuade you to do the right thing by a merrybegot like myself, I am prepared to use any means short of murder."

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

Cyanide, you see, is about the swiftest and painfullest thing out. Before I could move to do anything, I knew he was dead—poisoned and drowned and dead.

—Dorothy L. Sayers

*From "The Abominable History of the Man with Copper Fingers" (1928)*

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# BOOKED & PRINTED

## ROBERT C. HAHN

'Tis the season for mistletoe, folly, and mayhem, and mystery writers have a strong tradition of celebrating the season in stories and novels. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle did it in 1892 with "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle." In 1939, Agatha Christie gave us *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (a k a *A Holiday for Murder* and *Murder for Christmas*). Some other personal favorites include Margaret Maron's *Corpus Christmas* (1989), Jane Haddam's 1992 novel *A Stillness in Bethlehem*, and the short story collections edited by Charlotte MacLeod, *Mistletoe Mysteries* (1989) and *Christmas Stalkings* (1991).

This year also brings us some gaudy presents for the mystery aficionado. There are too many to include in just one column, but here are some to get you started.

Anne Perry has created an exquisite series of Christmas novellas and this year's, her sixth, features Thomas Pitt's sister-in-law, Emily Radley, in A CHRISTMAS GRACE (Ballantine, $18). Word artist, wordsmith, whatever you call her, Perry is as adept at describing settings as she is at sketching characters so vividly that one would recognize them instantly on sight.

Emily is happily preparing to spend Christmas 1895 in London with her family when she is asked to go to her estranged aunt's home in remote Connemara, on the far west side of Ireland. The aunt, Susannah, her father's sister, married an Irishman, a Roman Catholic, and was cut off from her Church of England family. Now near death, she wants family near, and Emily, urged by her husband, reluctantly makes the trek.

Emily discovers that not only is her aunt ill, but the village itself seems to be suffering from an illness of the soul. A violent storm strikes the village, and like a similar storm seven years previous, casts one lone survivor of a shipwreck upon the shore. The eerie coincidence quickens the plot, for the previous survivor was killed and the killer never discovered.

Emily, who has helped Thomas Pitt in his investigations, must try to discover the long-hidden killer before another tragedy occurs. The process turns out to be not only one of discovery, but of self-discovery as Emily gains a new perspective on her life and her marriage.

Perry has won much acclaim for both her Thomas Pitt series and her William Monk series, but her Christmas novellas are very special gems that deserve the highest praise.

Jeanne M. Dams has written her sixth book about Hilda Johansson, a



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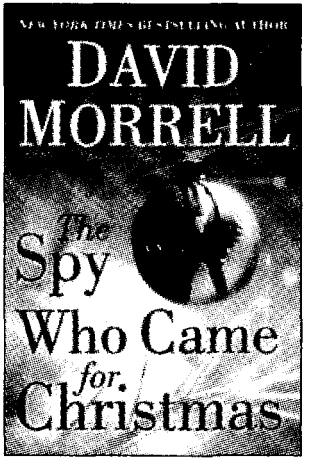
Swedish immigrant living in South Bend, Indianna, at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1904 at the start of INDIGO CHRISTMAS (Perseverance Press, $14.95), Hilda is now Mrs. Cavanaugh and no longer a servant but a lady, married to Patrick, a successful businessman.

Ethnic and class distinctions still play a prominent role in Dams's mysteries, and Hilda's change of status is far from smooth. Despite being able to afford things she never could before, she herself finds it difficult to adjust to the things she can no longer do—cooking and cleaning must be left to her servants—and the things she can do, such as mingle with society ladies as an (almost)-equal. Not all society ladies are willing to accept her as an equal and even her own family has some difficulty adjusting to her new status.

Dams explores the issues of class and prejudice in each of her novels, but it is particularly poignant in this one. Hilda helps organize a boys' club for the poor boys of South Bend, amid the prevalent attitudes that are both patronizing and prejudiced. And the Christmas season highlights even more the differences between the customs of her Swedish family and her husband's Irish one. But when her friend Norah's husband, Sean, is accused of murder after he finds the empty wallet of a man who dies in a fire, Hilda navigates and sometimes strays from the narrow path of what is proper for a woman and a lady to do.

Dams's small town setting is a melting pot at work, the warring forces of separation and assimilation that resulted, eventually, in immigrants becoming thoroughly American. *Indigo Christmas* is a particularly strong entry in this underappreciated series.




David Morrell is best known as a thriller writer—he is the creator of Rambo—but he's also shown a sensitive side in the memoir *Fireflies: A Father's Tale of Love and Loss,* and now he demonstrates a unique and imaginative take on the Christmas story.

Set in Santa Fe, New Mexico, THE SPY WHO CAME FOR CHRISTMAS (Vanguard Press, $15.95) is the story of Paul Kagan, a double agent for the United States who has successfully infiltrated the Russian mafia in this country. But to earn the trust of his putative comrades he has paid a terrific price, as he has committed terrible crimes.

Burned out but unable to walk away, Kagan still manages to foil the Christmas Eve kidnapping of the infant son of a charismatic religious leader by seizing the child himself. Wounded during his escape and weakening, pursued by killers and carrying the child, he seeks refuge in the home of an abused woman whose husband has left her and her young son without transportation or phone service.

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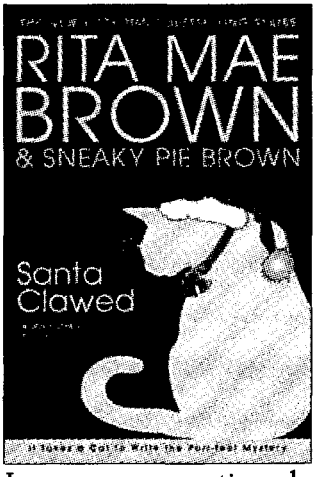
After reassuring the woman and her son and explaining the danger to the baby as well as to them, Kagan attempts to both husband his strength and fortify the house against a possible assault. Together the three make preparations and while they wait Kagan relates the Christmas story as he learned it from a famous spymaster.

Morrell spins a tale that is both suspenseful and that casts an original, inventive, yet still reverent light on the Nativity. It is a tale that will change one family and one man's life forever and surely, it is the most unusual Christmas mystery in many a season.

On a much lighter note, Rita Mae Brown and her cat Sneaky Pie Brown offer a cozy Christmas mystery featuring Mary Minor "Harry" Haristeen, her talking animals, and many of the familiar crowd from Crozet, Virginia, in SANTA CLAWED (Bantam, $25), the seventeenth novel in the series.

Fans will know that Harry has two cats, Mrs. Murphy and Pewter, and a corgi named Tee Tucker who live with her on her farm. The animals can "talk" to each other as well as to Harry's barn residents, a black snake, an owl, and a possum. Of course, the human characters are unable to share in the animals' communication.




Despite living in the bucolic setting of Crozet nestled at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Harry has the unfortunate habit of either finding a crime scene or having one find her with great frequency. Since she is merely human, it usually takes her four-footed friends to effect a rescue.

When Harry takes her husband, Fair, to see the Christmas tree she has selected at The Brothers of Love lot, they discover one of the brothers slain beneath a tree. The Brothers of Love are a monastic order who live up the mountain and whose members have joined the order after overcoming various problems such as addictions to gambling, alcohol, drugs, or crimes of one sort or another. A large portion of their operating funds comes from the annual Christmas tree sale.

So while most of the residents of Crozet continue preparing for the holidays and dealing with usual domestic problems such as straying spouses or what presents to buy, Harry also speculates on some of the oddities surrounding the killing which is officially being investigated by Sheriff Rick Shaw and Harry's good friend, Deputy Cynthia Cooper.

Needless to say, the animals once again provide both the best comic moments and timely heroism to help Harry solve the crime and emerge, not unscathed, but victorious.

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C. S. Challinor's CHRISTMAS IS MURDER (Midnight Ink, $13.95) dishes up an English manor house mystery with the traditional elements: a murder, a small contingent of suspects thrown together, and an engaging and witty sleuth.

Scottish barrister Rex Graves is the last guest to arrive at the manor and he does so in the teeth of a fiece winter storm, one which will isolate the manor and leave its inhabitants at the mercy of a killer. Graves's mother and Swanmere's owner, Dahlia Smithings, were old friends, hence Graves's invitation to the home converted to hotel.

When Graves arrives there has already been one death. Wealthy, disabled WWII veteran Henry Lawdry has succumbed to an apparent heart attack. That leaves a staff of four and eight guests to celebrate the holiday season. The staff consists of Mrs. Smithings, her cook, a waitress, and an arthritic handyman. The guests include Miriam Greenbaum, a New York literary agent; friends Wanda Martyr, a divorcee, and Helen D'Arcy; Anthony Smart, an antiques dealer, and his partner, Patrick Vance; and newlyweds Yvette and Charley Perkins.

It is Charley who reveals to Graves his suspicion that Lawdry was poisoned and produces some likely evidence. Further deaths will fuel fear and mistrust as Graves takes the lead in trying to sort out the killer from the potential flock of victims.

Challinor will keep most readers guessing as she cleverly spreads suspicion and clues that point in one direction, then another.

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In John Darnton's BLACK & WHITE AND DEAD ALL OVER (Knopf, $24.95), the New York *Globe* secretary finds the assistant managing editor, Theodore Ratnoff, dead on the newsroom floor, an old-fashioned editor's spike stuck to his chest. The suspects consist of the entire newspaper staff, all of whom hated Ratnoff's savage corrections. A talented young reporter assigned to cover the murder, Jude Hurley, makes an uneasy alliance with an Ivy-league educated female detective, and when more bodies appear in increasingly grotesque positions at the paper, Hurley finds himself in the killer's crosshairs.

Darnton, a veteran reporter for the real-life New York *Times*, provides an uproarious look at a newspaper in tumult; what the characters endure serve as tantalizing comments on the modern journalism industry. A media mogul, Lester Moloch, reduces great papers to tabloids and threatens the Globe's impractical publisher, Elisha Hagenbuckle, with a buyout. Edith Sawyer, an celebrity journalist, faces accusations of fraud, and her competitive antics are often darkly hilarious. Hurley is valiant, overworked, and totally, comically unrecognized by his bosses. Well-read mystery fans will likely pick out the murderer within the first few chapters, but the ride toward the climax is a great deal of ink-stained fun. —*Laurel Fantauzzo*



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# THE ICICLE JUDGMENT

## MIKE CULPEPPER

Gwyneth was in the pasture already, testing the fleece on the pregnant ewes for pull. Birthing would begin in a month or less and some of the sheep had already begun to loosen their wool. Colm scraped the thin snow from a patch of ground and the sheep began ambling toward the exposed grass. He climbed up on the round stone-walled hayguard and began forking hay onto the cleared patch. From time to time he glanced up at Gwyneth as she moved through the sheep, one hand gently stroking at their wool, the other clutching at the ragged cloth she wore for a shawl. Her breath rose in clouds about her face, her cheeks red with the cold.

"Fine thing," muttered Colm, "a man like me doing this kind of labor, descended from kings as I am."

Gwyneth looked up at him. "Oh, yes, as are we all! Not a thrall on the place but isn't royalty gone astray."

"Oh, but it's so! A king I would be in my own land!"

"King of the liars!" She looked directly at him and Colm caught his breath. Gwyneth had blue eyes brighter than any sky and hair blacker than any night.

"Well, I'm not saying my kingdom is the grandest in the world, but my father set a raven flying across it when I was born and I was old enough to talk when it reached the far border."

"Speaking from the cradle, were you?" She turned away, but Colm could tell she was smiling.

"I don't want to brag, but I had three languages by then and those not half what was required to give direction to all the tribes in the realm. Indeed, they were so many we could never finish a census. By the time you counted the last of my father's subjects, the ones you began with had birthed whole new families with children of their own and you had to begin counting all over again!"

"Oh, indeed, more subjects than lice on your head, no doubt."

"Well, I don't want to brag—"

"No, please don't."

Colm grinned. "It so happens that—"

"Colm! Where is that lazy good-for-nothing?" Bjorn was yelling. "Colm!"

"Coming!"



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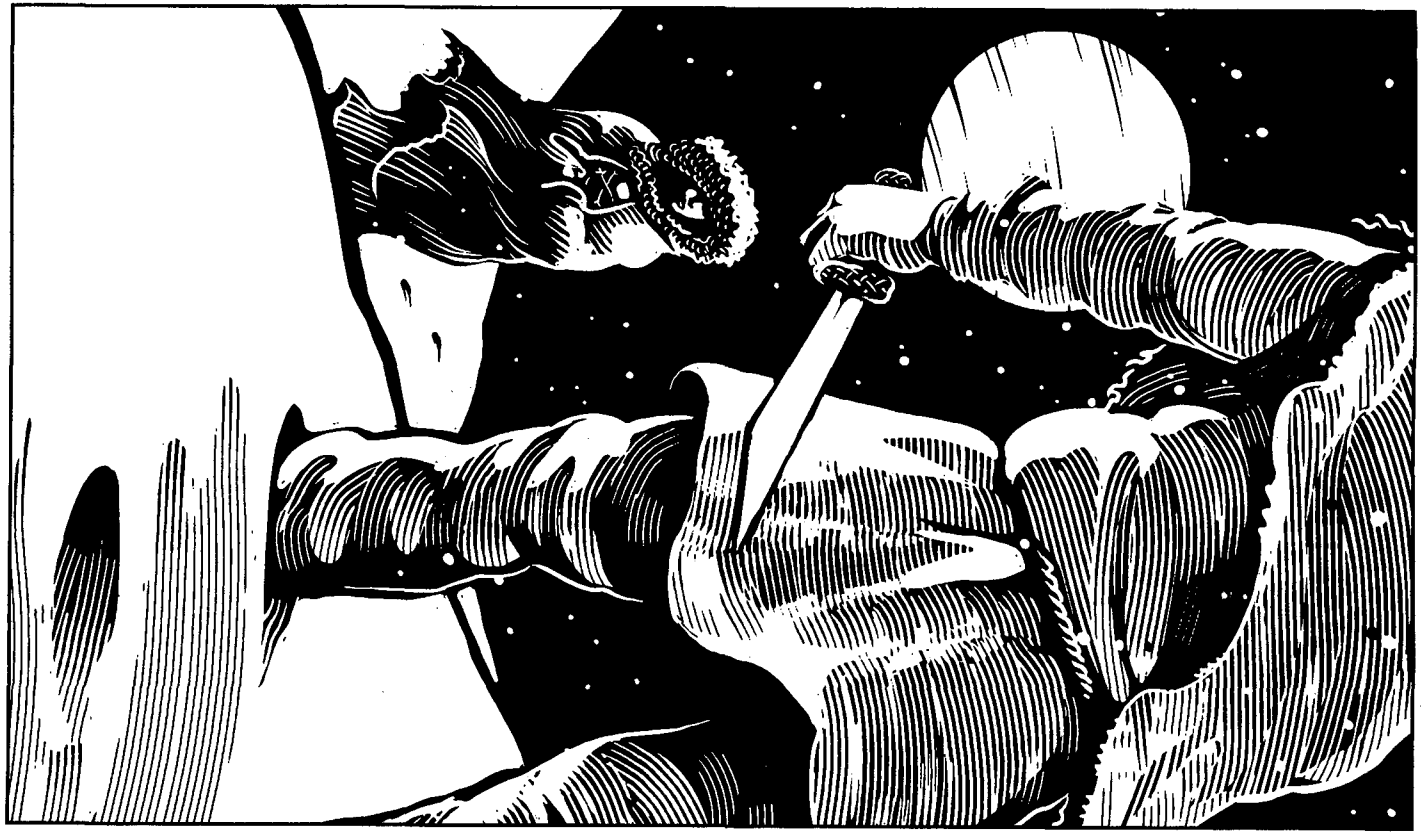
Tim Foley



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"I want the cowshed shovelled out before dark so you better hop to it!"

"Excuse me," Colm said, "but I must attend to matters of state."

"Certainly, Your Majesty," said Gwyneth, "and don't forget your dung-shovel."

Colm was in a fair state of mind when he reached the cowshed, but Bjorn soon darkened his mood. Yelling and ordering him about as though a man needed directions to shovel shit! Bjorn wasn't a bad master but he was trying to impress his visitor, Hastein, so he fussed and blustered. Hastein was slightly higher in rank than Bjorn—both were free landowners who followed the chieftain Thorolf to the Althing, but Thorolf trusted Hastein and sometimes sent him about to do his bidding. No doubt he reported back what he saw of the other farmers too. Bjorn had only come to Iceland a few years before with his family and slaves, including Colm and Gwyneth. He was well received at first—Hebrideans were all supposed to be rich from piracy and plunder—but it was soon discovered that Bjorn had little more than what was needed to buy his land and set up farming. Still, he worked hard, and his wife, Aud, was an efficient manager, so in time Bjorn might become wealthy. Colm could be proud of his master.

Like all slaves, Colm dreamed of being free. He could not yet see a way this might happen, but he was only seventeen, so he thought everything was possible. When he was very small he saw one of his brothers' heads lifted on a raider's spear. Later, he heard his other brother screaming in agony from inside a burning church. Not set ablaze by foreign pagans, either, but by a war party up from Munster—just another skirmish in the everlasting conflict over the high kingship. Colm was ten when he was seized by raiders and taken, first to the Hebrides where he was dealt to Bjorn's family, then to Iceland. This was not the worst place in the world, Colm knew. There were neither foreigners raiding from without nor wars within. Only the occasional feud spoiled the peace. That, and the slave's chance of being sacrificed to a pagan god, or murdered for some offhand reason, or for no reason at all.

On the other hand, peaceable though it might be, Iceland lacked bread. Colm spooned up *skyr*—the thickened sour milk that was his supper—and wished he had even a stale crust of the coarsest loaf ever baked to chew on. But what little grain this country produced was all brewed into beer—not that Colm would have minded a mug or two of that as well. Might as well wish for meat, he thought, and cake, too, while I'm at it.

Gwyneth swept through the longhall, carrying a great pitcher of beer like a vision of plenty right out of Colm's imaginings. She passed into the end room where Bjorn entertained Hastein. Colm moved toward the doorway so he could look in and watch her as she moved about, serving the men. A small pair of scissors dangled from her apron, forgotten and left from her work of trimming the woven cloth. It flashed like a jewel in the lamplight of the inner room.

Bjorn and Hastein drained their cups, matching each other drink for drink, as men must do. Gwyneth refilled them and Hastein looked up and studied her face for a long moment. Colm crept up to the doorway

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and pressed himself against the turf wall, listening.

". . . But stay the night!" said Bjorn.

"No, I want to be going back," answered Hastein, his voice slurred with drink.

"It's dark and dangerous."

"The moon is shining bright as day. Anyway, send a slave with me to light the way. Oh . . . that one perhaps."

"If you insist on going, I'll get one of the men—"

"No. She's the one I want." Colm stiffened. He knew that Hastein meant Gwyneth.

"And just how long do you plan on keeping her?" Aud's voice. "There's work she needs to be doing, you know."

"I'm not used to being questioned by a woman."

"You take a female slave, you interfere with women's work." Bjorn setting Hastein straight. He and Aud worked well together. But now he was setting into a dispute with his chieftain's agent.

Hastein backed away from a quarrel. "She'll be back by morning. I just want her for the night."

"Early morning, mind. We can't be shorthanded this time of year." Aud wanted to avoid a confrontation that might wind up in bloodshed. Many a feud had been started by hasty words. And a slave's virtue was of no account.

A few minutes later, Hastein and Bjorn came into the longhall, heading toward the door. Gwyneth came after, carrying a torch, dragging her feet. Aud walked behind, urging her on. The four walked outside, then Bjorn and Aud returned. Aud went back into the end room to make certain the slave girls had cleaned up properly. Bjorn surveyed the longhall.

Most of the slaves were already asleep on the benches. Colm lay still under his cloak, eyes shut. He felt Bjorn's gaze track over him, then heard the door to Bjorn's sleeping compartment open. Aud came into the longhall, muttering to herself, and a moment later Colm heard the bedchamber door shut. He waited a few minutes, listening to Aud and Bjorn talking softly to one another, sifting through the events of the day, then Colm reached into a hiding place he had made beneath the bench and took out the knife he had hidden there, a single-edged scramasax he had lifted from the belongings of a dead English slave. He crept from the bench to the door and glanced back. In the low firelight his bunched cloak looked as though someone were asleep beneath it.

Outside, the bright moon reflected from the frosted earth. Everything glowed with pale light. There were no shadows anywhere. The cold cut through Colm's thin shirt, but he ignored it and began trotting out of the farmyard toward the path that ran to Hastein's farm, about four miles away. He kept one hand on the handle of his knife. Colm had no idea what he was going to do. He was slow and cautious in his plans and liked to think carefully before acting, but now he was swept up by dark feelings about Hastein and Gwyneth.

About a mile along, Colm saw Gwyneth on the path ahead, coming his way. They came abreast of one another and looked directly into each

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other's face. Neither said a word. Then Gwyneth began walking back toward the farm and Colm continued on the way.

Ahead were cliffs rising above the path. Southfacing, they caught an hour or two of sun each day. Great icicles formed there and hung in glittering rows from a frozen shelf that jutted into space. Below the ice, lying beside the path, Colm could see the crumpled shape of a man's body. He walked up slowly and crouched down, examining the body in the moonlight.

Hastein was dead. Blood had poured from a steaming wound in his neck and was already freezing into the earth. Colm rocked on his heels, thinking. Something caught his eye in the crusted snow nearby. He scratched it up: a small pair of scissors, like women used to trim cloth. Colm closed his fist about it and sat thinking a long while.

In the morning, Colm walked out of the longhall into sun so bright it hurt his eyes. He crossed the farmyard to the cattle byre to begin his day of work, and all the time, he was listening for the shouts and cries that meant Hastein's body was discovered.

He caught sight of Gwyneth ahead and caught up to her. She jumped at his touch when Colm pressed the scissors into her hand. "You dropped this," he said. Her face was deathly pale and her eyes wide with fear. "Don't worry," he said. "It will all come right. Keep to your story." He walked away before anyone saw them talking together.

Gwyneth had told the other women that Hastein had become sick from the beer and lost all appetite for anything but going home and passing out. So she had returned. Maybe there was a pool of frozen vomit somewhere along the path, thought Colm, but it didn't matter. It wasn't unusual for drunken men to spew their supper, but generally they just started drinking again. People would ask if the lust-filled Hastein would really be deterred from his satisfaction by such a small thing.

And there it was! Colm heard the distant racket of men yelling. He pretended to work along and listened out for more.

Bjorn, too, heard the noise and came out into the farmyard to look way off down the path. He caught sight of Colm in the byre and beckoned him forward. "Come on! Let's see what that is." Bjorn hesitated, then went inside the hall and returned carrying a sword and a spear. He handed the spear to Colm. The two of them walked briskly along the path.

A half dozen men bustled about under the ice-hung cliffs. They shouted and gestured, pointing here and there. At their center, Thorolf stood silently, watching as Bjorn and Colm approached.

Bjorn and Thorolf greeted one another. Thorolf pointed at the body. Bjorn walked over to it, recognized Hastein, and returned to Thorolf. He explained that he had tried to make Hastein stay the night, but the man lusted for a slave girl and insisted on leaving with her.

"What about the girl?" asked Thorolf. And Bjorn told how Hastein was sick with drink and the girl had returned. Thorolf grunted and turned his eyes to the body. "He was stabbed in the throat," he said. Colm stopped

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breathing. Bjorn went back to the corpse. He knelt and examined it.

A great patch of frozen blood spread around Hastein's head and shoulders, like a cloak laid upon the ground. His body was covered with shards and pieces of broken ice. Slowly Bjorn raised his eyes upward. There were no icicles directly above. Slowly Bjorn turned his head and fixed his gaze on the massive icicles hanging from the rest of the cliff. Slowly he returned his gaze to the empty space above Hastein. Slowly he brought it down to the body.

Bjorn was no fool. He never uttered a sound but by his manner indicated what he thought happened here. Colm stood motionless. Thorolf said, "There is some doubt the ice would make a wound like that."

Bjorn stood and faced him. Hastein had been Bjorn's guest. If the man was judged to be murdered then Bjorn must pay, in gold or blood. Bjorn said, "We will have a test." He looked at Colm and Colm knew fear, afraid he might be the test subject. But Bjorn said, "Fetch a goat. Quickly!" Colm dropped his spear and began running back to the farm. "The old one," Bjorn yelled after him, "The one with the patchy coat."

When Colm returned with the goat, Bjorn was hunched over the body, picking up icicle spears and testing their points with his finger. He chose a sturdy, sharp one and started toward the goat.

"No," said Thorolf, "Unless you think a person stabbed Hastein that way."

"No," said Bjorn. He gestured and Colm brought the goat over to him. Bjorn walked the goat underneath the great hanging sheet of ice on the cliff next to the empty space over Hastein's body. He examined the ice carefully, then selected a spot directly beneath some great sharp spears, perhaps four feet long. He tethered the goat there.

"Now what?" said Thorolf.

Bjorn pointed at the mass of ice. "See how it is beginning to crack along there? When that crack deepens or runs the length of the ice, it will fall, with all its weight."

"Shall we wait till spring?"

"No," said Bjorn. He stood opposite the goat and picked up a stone. He stood for a moment, looking up at the ice, selecting a spot. Colm waited anxiously. This was exactly what he had done the night before to bring down the ice onto Hastein's body. Everyone now was thinking what he had hoped they would think—that Hastein was killed by his own drunken misfortune and a falling icicle—everyone with the possible exception of Thorolf, that is, and Thorolf's opinion was the only one that mattered.

Bjorn prepared to throw a stone and Colm prayed. He had not seen a priest since he was a child and he had little memory of what a prayer should be. He addressed God the same way he might try to persuade any master—he appealed to his vanity: "You are powerful, Lord! Show these pagans your strength!"

Bjorn hurled the stone and it struck the ice mass just below the cliff's lip. Another crack started in the ice, but the icicles did not fall. Everyone was silent. Unable to stop himself, Colm suddenly seized up a stone and threw it at the crack in the ice. The stone bounced off. Then, as everyone

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watched, the crack lengthened and spread toward the edge of the ice. There was a grating, gritting sound. The goat looked up above just as a huge chunk, toothed with icicles, dropped from the cliff.

The goat staggered and fell as the mass struck it. It was not an icicle but a piece of embedded rock that opened the animal's throat. A geyser of blood sprayed up. Blood pumped dramatically onto the steaming earth. The men were transfixed by the spectacle. Colm hoped that none would notice that the icicles all had shattered on the goat's back. Not one had pierced its hide. Nor could he make a falling icicle pierce Hastein's body the night before. He had even poked one into Hastein's neck wound, but the body held enough warmth to melt its tip and the icicle had fallen away.

That rock was lucky, thought Colm. Then he was frightened of his thought. "I don't mean to offend you, Lord! I know it was your power and not heathen luck that did this!" Hastily, he prayed other words of flattery and appeasement. He did not want to anger this master!

The blood stopped flowing and the men began milling about, talking excitedly, waving their arms, running from the goat to Hastein, creating narratives of just how he must have been walking and where he was when the ice fell. Someone struck the cliff wall and leaped back as a stray icicle fell from above to shatter on the earth. The other men laughed at his fear. Then they said perhaps Hastein had bumped the rock wall and brought down the ice. After all, another man had just escaped death from a falling icicle! So they chattered and wove a story that they would believe.

Thorolf and Bjorn stood quietly by, listening. Finally, Thorolf turned toward Bjorn and muttered, "Hastein always was a fool when he was drunk." Bjorn smiled but kept his counsel. Thorolf turned back toward the body. "It's good to settle these matters without controversy. No one wants to bring the law into it."

"It is good we know the truth," said Bjorn.

"Truth is indeed a rare thing," said Thorolf. "Well, I should go to Hastein's place and tell what has happened." He gestured at the other men still talking and excited. "These will help me, I'm certain." He turned back to Bjorn. "You must visit me soon. We will discuss the Althing and other matters."

Bjorn smiled with undisguised pleasure. Thorolf's words meant he was going to replace Hastein as Thorolf's lieutenant. "I will do so. Before the lambing. And you must visit me." Thorolf nodded and they slapped hands.

The men gathered up Hastein's body and slung it over a horse. Someone said, "The goat should be dedicated as a sacrifice." And others took up the words. "Pitch it over the sea cliff!" they said. "Hang it from a pole!"

Bjorn smiled and said nothing. He waited until Thorolf and the others had left before telling Colm to fetch the goat's carcass.

"We'll take it back with us. I don't think the gods will miss one scrawny goat." He grinned. "And some meat will be welcome."

Colm felt saliva squirt into his mouth. Meat! He slung the goat across his shoulders and they started back to the farm. Bjorn hadn't actually said there would be any for him, of course, but a slave could always dream!

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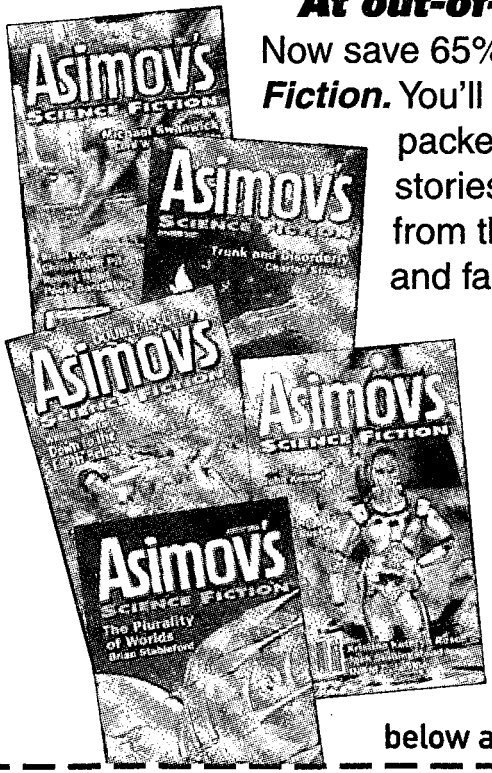


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# A WALK IN THE PARK

## IAIN ROWAN

"Can't believe people choose to live in a place like this," the hired killer said, peering out of the car window at the scattering of houses.

Mason nodded. "I'd go mad in a day. You can see the whole village from here. Church. One pub. One phone box. Shop that isn't much bigger than the phone box. And that's it." I'm talking too much, Mason thought. Nerves.

He'd picked the killer up at King's Cross earlier that day. When Mason introduced himself, the man stared at him as if he were mad and then shrugged and said, "Call me Smith, if you want." Smith had travelled down on the train from Newcastle with all the other commuters. It was one of Davey Hume's rules: If there was any killing to be done, he brought someone in from another city. They turned up, did the job, got paid, and vanished. Davey's theory was that this sowed confusion. Mason thought that it meant someone was more likely to grass them all up somewhere along the line, but he kept it to himself because you didn't contradict Davey Hume.

Mason fidgeted uneasily in the car seat. He'd pulled into the car park of The Cardinal's Arms, Kingsbourne's only pub. The village was about fifteen miles from Dover, and about a light year from civilization, the nearest tube station, and the twenty-first century. Mason had been around violence much of his life, you couldn't be part of Davey's circus without it, but he still felt uncomfortable when he had to deal with men like Smith. I'm an organizer, a planner, Mason thought. An accountant. Not muscle. I leave that to other people. Davey values my brains, my smartness. But people like Con Murphy resent me because I'm in closer with Davey and they're not, and because they've got the brains of a cue ball. So they're forever nagging at Davey about how I never get my hands dirty, and he sends me on jobs like this, once in a while, just to prove that I can be one of the boys.

"Be my representative on the spot," Davey had said, holding court in The Palace after closing time, feet up on a table, glass of Macallan in his hand, the faithful and the followers gathered around to hear him. "Make sure business gets carried out properly. And then pay the man afterwards."

"Maybe he could hold his hand too," Con had muttered, to sniggers from some of his boys.



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Mason didn't acknowledge the insult, just waited for Davey to react.

"Con, you questioning my judgment?" Davey said after a while, in a very quiet voice.

"No, Davey, just—no. Sorry." Con glared at Mason, who just stared serenely into space.

Mason had kept glancing at the speedometer all the way down from London. The car had been stolen to order from a quiet London suburb the night before and fitted with scrapyard plates, and Smith and his sports bag were in the front of the car, and eight thousand pounds in cash and a gun that Davey had insisted Mason bring were hidden in the back, so he didn't want to be pulled over for a traffic offence. Mason hadn't wanted the gun, didn't like it, didn't see why he needed it, but he didn't dare say so. The semi-detached houses of the London commuter belt had given way to fields and trees interspersed by an occasional village, some executive developments, large brick houses with parking for three cars, others picture-postcard villages with thatched cottages and duck ponds. Mason hated it all; he'd grown up in London, spent his life in London, wasn't used to seeing green unless it had railings round it, wasn't used to there being space, not people.

Late in the afternoon, Mason had turned off the London to Dover road and onto a winding lane that curved its way through a valley of slowly waving cornfields and orchards of low, neat apple trees.

"This it?" Smith had said.

"This is it. Not exactly the center of civilization, is it?"

A squat stone church sat in the middle of a huddle of houses, crows lazily circling its weathered green spire. The ground floor of one small house had been converted into a shop that doubled as a post office. Faded posters in the window advertised promotions that had finished a year or more earlier. Not far past the shop was a pub with a car park that would hold about four cars, if they weren't too big. Mason had pulled in and switched the engine off. Theirs was the only car there. Hanging baskets spilt bright blooms of orange and red over the entrance to the pub. No one went in, or came out.

The two men sat in the car for a couple of minutes and watched the village, and then Smith said, "Let's take a look at the place, see the lie of the land."

Mason steered the car out of the car park and turned left. He had sat up late the night before, memorized the small square of map. Within a hundred yards the village became nothing more than an occasional house set amongst tight copses of trees, or fields fenced with barbed wire behind which sturdy horses snuffled placid and lazy among the long grass. Then the woods took over, and there was nothing on either side but the trees. Mason drove under a disused railway bridge with bushes tumbling over its faded brick walls.

"Might as well be on the moon," Mason muttered.

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Not far beyond the bridge the trees drew back on the left to make space for a low brick building that squatted a little way back from the road. Its windows were boarded up and ivy strangled the walls. A faded sign announced it as the Kingham Valley Pumping Station, but the screws holding one end of the sign up had long since rusted away, and it now hung drunkenly away from the wall. A minute later the woods on the other side opened up and became scrubby grass. Sheep huddled and stared at the road, their backs splashed with splotches of blue dye. Then there was a tall wooden fence, and a bungalow set a way back from the road. The fence was high enough, and the house low enough, that not much more could be seen from a passing car.

"That's it," Mason said. "First house past the waterworks, or whatever the hell it was. Only house past the waterworks, come to that."

"Aye, that'll be the one," Smith said, swiveling in his seat to keep the house in sight. "Nice and private. Not going to get any nosy neighbors rustling their net curtains here, are you? Bit different from my usual turf, this. Job'll be a walk in the park."

"Bloody big park," Mason said. "And no ice cream van either."

"You're sure it's just the one man?" Smith asked.

"That's what I was told. And not young, either, he must be getting on a bit now too."

"Not for much longer, he won't be."

They drove in silence for a while after this. Mason didn't know much about the man they had been sent to kill. He had a photo, an address, a name, and what Davey had said to him in the back office at The Palace the day before.

"Thought this one was dead," Davey had said. "Thought someone else had done the job for me. I'd heard he'd gone to Spain, got on the wrong side of someone there and they'd had him done. Turns out he just moved on. But this time, he's not going anywhere. Except down there." He grinned and jerked his thumb at the floor. "You're my money man, Masey, you must know what I mean. How good it feels when there's a bad debt on the books for years, and you finally get to clear it."

"This one goes back a long way, then?"

"Right back to the early days. He worked for me when things was really coming together, growing into what I have now. I thought he was going to be a real asset. Turns out he was just a rip-off merchant, and he ripped me off and got away with it. Only one that ever has." He smiled, but there was little humor present. "Except he's not got away with, has he? It's taken years, but I've found him. Little rats, they squeak to each other, and somewhere down the line one of them squeaks in my ear in return for a crumb or two. He's down in Kent, some poxy village in the middle of nowhere, out Dover way. Thought he'd stay hidden. But I found him. I can trust you to look after this one, Masey?"

"Of course, Davey, you know that. Though I've got to say, it's not real-

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ly my thing." It was as close to a protest as Mason dared get.

Davey Hume nodded, and took a long drink from his crystal tumbler. "Keeps the boys happy though. Good for morale if they see you getting your hands dirty from time to time."

"Sure, it's no problem Davey, day out in the country, I can handle that."

Mason came to a widening in the road. He turned the car around and they drove back past the bungalow again, not slowing much.

"Car in the drive," Mason observed. "He's probably in."

"Aye, probably."

"Not fancy it now?"

But a muddy Land Rover came barreling along the narrow road towards them, and when Mason got the car back down from the grass verge and back onto the tarmac, his palms sweating, Smith said "No. When it's dark and late. Prefer it dark and late. We'll park up by the waterworks, walk down along the lane, he won't even hear us coming. Job done, then back to the car."

"Um," Mason said. "Us? I thought I'd be staying with the car."

"Did you, now?" Smith said.

"Yeah. I thought you'd, well, you know, prefer to just get on and do the job. Not really my thing, I'm just a money man, a manager, really."

"A manager." Smith's voice was without any inflection, but Mason felt that the man was laughing at him all the same.

"Yeah, you know, I look after business."

"Aye, well that's what you'll be doing tonight," Smith said. "Looking after business. That way I've got an extra pair of hands if I need them, and I don't have to worry about you getting spooked by a rabbit and driving off without me."

"I wouldn't do that," Mason protested.

"Not twice," Smith said, and there was an uncomfortable silence for a few moments. "Besides," he went on, "this is the country, they always have dogs out in the country, and if there is a dog I'm going to need someone to occupy it for me."

Mason drove through the village and out onto the busy lanes of the A2, joining the endless streams of articulated lorries heading for Dover. Mason pointed out to Smith that they had hours to kill—although he stumbled over the word when he said it—and that it wasn't a good idea to hang around the village.

"Not that there's a lot to hang around for," he said. "Apart from the pub. And we might stand out a bit in there. Probably the sort of place where they all stop talking and turn to look whenever strangers come in. How d'you fancy grabbing something to eat? I'll drive us down to Dover. Get a sandwich, cup of coffee." He didn't feel like eating, not at all, but it would be something to do.

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"Do whatever you like," Smith said, reclining his seat and closing his eyes. "I don't eat before a job. Keeps me sharp. I'm going to have a kip now though, so I don't care what you do as long as you don't disturb me, and wake me with a coffee when it's good and late."

Then he just lay back in his seat, not moving, like a statue. Mason couldn't even see him breathing, and couldn't tell whether the man was asleep or not. He drove into Dover, the wide sweep of the road curving down towards the flat silver of the sea. Mason couldn't think of anything to do so he just drove around aimlessly for a while, and then parked in a car park with a sea view and sat there, staring out of the windscreen as it grew dark, watching the lights of ships slowly moving out at sea, wishing he could sleep, wishing he could put the radio on and listen to it to pass the time but too scared that it would wake the other man up.

After forever Mason thought, At last, it's time. He drove to a service station, bought some coffee out of a machine, and got back into the car.

Smith opened his eyes suddenly, the way a cat does, before Mason could say anything to wake him up. He sat up in one fluid motion, opened the car door, stepped out and stretched. Then he got back in, adjusted his seat, and took the coffee out of Mason's hands.

"I'll drink this on the way," he said. "Let's get going."

Mason parked the car in the driveway to the pumping station and switched off the engine. Smith opened the sports bag at his feet and took out something wrapped in a cloth.

"Tools of the trade," he said, and he began to unwrap it.

Mason nodded, and said, "Yeah, I'll just get mine," and hoped that sounded as if it were something that he said every day. Smith put a hand on his shoulder, and leant in close to him, too close.

"You know how to use it?"

"Sure," Mason said, and it was true. In a way. Big Bry had shown him one night in a back room of the Palace, and he'd even pulled the trigger a few times, although only after Bry had taken the bullets out.

"My job," Smith said. "So my rules. You stick it somewhere safe. You keep it there. You don't mess with it, you don't play around with it, you just keep it there in case I need a backup and ask you for it. You understand?"

"Sure, whatever you say. It's your operation."

"That it is. And one more thing." Smith still hadn't moved his face away. Mason could smell the coffee on his breath.

"What?"

"You point it near me—anywhere near me—and I'll kill you. You understand?"

Mason swallowed. "Yes."

Mason thought about just leaving the gun in the car, but he didn't want

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Smith to think that he was afraid, so he got out of the car and leaned in the back door. He pulled the gun from under the seat and put it into his jacket pocket, trying to handle it as if it were something that he did every day. When he turned back, Smith was standing by the side of the road, as motionless and dark as one of the trees, holding his gun down at the side of one leg. In the darkness, it looked as if he was pointing an accusing finger at the ground.

At first, as they walked down the road, the silence pressed in on Mason like a weight. After a few moments though, he realized that it was not silent at all. He could hear skitterings in the undergrowth to the side, rustlings in the trees as if their footsteps were disturbing whatever was sleeping there. From a little way off into the woods came a noise somewhere between a grunt and a cough that made him jump; he looked at Smith to see if the other man had seen, but the killer was walking ahead now, with cautious, quiet steps. They had reached the house.

The two men slunk across the road and into the shadow of the fence. Mason noticed that when they moved, Smith held his gun up high to the side of his head, as if he were listening to it, like special agents do in films. He loves all this, Mason thought. I bet he's got a bookshelf full of books about special forces. They waited at the fence, peering into the darkness of the garden, listening.

"What you reckon then?" Mason whispered. "Dog?"

Smith took hold of the fence, rattled it gently, waited. Then shook his head. "Would come running," he muttered.

"Might be in the house."

Smith just held the pistol up, then pointed it into the darkness and mimed a shot. Mason looked away. Killing a man was one thing, that was business, but killing a dog was just cruel. He'd always had a dog when he was little. He remembered how he'd cried when his red setter Rusty, as dumb as a plank but his best friend in the whole world, had run into the path of a delivery van. Smith climbed over the fence and into the garden, and Mason followed him. As he went over, the fence creaked, and to Mason it sounded like a tree falling. They hesitated for a moment, but no lights came on in the house, no doors opened.

Smith waved towards the side of the house. They were going to go in round the back. The two of them stepped cautiously through the shadows, following the edge of the garden around the house, walking silent on the soft grass.

Then Mason thought, That's strange, we're miles from the sea here, but I'll swear I can hear it. Then the sound changed, swelling, sounding more like there was a party of lunatics out there in the darkness with them, hiding in the bushes, cackling away.

"Hell is that?" Smith said, and the sound grew, a chattering jabber, and Mason thought of the sea again because it looked as if a wave had broken around the corner of the house and towards them, white froth surging for-

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ward over rocks, the noise louder than ever. Both men backed off a step, but by then the geese were in a frenzy, shouting their indignant alarm and lifting their wings with anger.

Smith ran for the fence and vaulted it in one go. Mason followed him, clambered over, and then dropped down to the ground, his heart racing, his breath shallow and fast.

"Stay quiet," Smith muttered. "Saves us breaking in. He'll come out to see what's going on, see if it's a fox or something. I'll get a shot then, and we're done. Geese. Jesus."

No lights came on in the house, no doors opened. Gradually the gabble of the geese subsided into a quiet chatter, and the flock wandered off round to the back of the house again, their panic over. Then the light over the porch clicked on, and Mason jumped. The front door opened a little way, but they could not see in, and no one came out. Smith rose to half standing, rested his arms on the top of the fence, aiming at the space just in front of the door.

Come on, come out, Mason thought, and then I can go home. I can pay Rambo here his money and get back to the world I know, where at this time at night I can walk fifty yards from my front door and get a drink, place a bet, have a meal, find a woman. And no geese, just the damn pigeons.

Then the darkness towards the back of the house blossomed into a fierce light and there was a roar, and a rattle on the fence like hail that nearly stopped Mason's heart and sent Smith falling backwards to the floor and then scrabbling to his feet again. Mason didn't need telling twice, didn't care whether Smith was with him or not, he just wanted to get away before the shotgun roared again. He raced into the road but felt as open and exposed as if he'd been in the middle of a vast plain, so he ran straight into the trees on the other side, a mad, frantic scramble, tripping over branches, nearly breaking his ankle when he caught his foot in a hollow, brambles ripping at his hands, his face. He realized that he was holding his gun in his hand, and could not remember having taken it out of his pocket. Smith had caught up with him, and ran alongside him until Mason had to stop because his lungs were burning and he thought that he was going to throw up. He bent forward, hands on his thighs, the metal of the gun cold through his trousers. When he could breathe again without pain he crouched down. Smith did the same.

"Bastard," Smith said. "Nearly killed me. My face is bleeding, look." He shoved a dark hand towards Mason. "Christ. It's not stopping. Splinters off the fence, I can feel them. Tell you, I'm going to come back another time, and I'm going to have him. He's a dead man. Where's the car?"

"By the road," Mason said.

"Aye, I know it's *by* the road, but where the hell *is* the road?"

There was a long silence.

"Maybe that way," Mason said in the end, waving roughly in the last direction he remembered running from. He had no idea where the car

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was, no idea where the road was, he just wanted to be home amongst the concrete and the brick, back where there were lights everywhere, all night, burning away the darkness.

"What was that?" Smith said, whipping his gun up and pointing it at random places in the darkness. "Did you hear that?"

"Countryside," Mason said, "there'll be rabbits and owls and stuff, foxes, I dunno, all sorts, the whole bloody place is alive."

"No way was this a rabbit," Smith said. "This sounded bigger."

They crouched, listening, and for a long moment that seemed like an hour, there was not a sound. Then the air rippled into life above them, a flapping flutter low above their heads, and both men swore and nearly shot at whatever it was. Something in the carpet of leaves rustled, and Smith said, "We've got to get back to the road, this is doing my head in."

Then a quiet voice said, "Welcome to the country," and Smith fired two, three times, but Mason wasn't waiting to see what happened next, he just ran off into the woods again, gripping tight onto his own gun, thinking please let this be the way back to the road, please. When the shotgun roared again he fell, stumbling over a tree root that tried to curl its way around his ankle, and a pain grabbed his leg and squeezed. He stood up, trying to convince himself that he hadn't just twisted his ankle, and took a couple of tentative steps, but each time he put any weight on that foot, the pain came burning back in. It didn't matter though, he had to keep moving. The shotgun hadn't sounded that close, but he had lost any sense of direction amongst the trees and for all he knew he was walking towards it. He held his gun tight in a sweating hand, and tried to walk as quietly as he could through the undergrowth, talking to himself under his breath to take his mind off the pain and the fear and the darkness, repeating over and over, "one step, and another bloody step, one step, and another bloody step, one step and another bloody step."

Then Mason heard the rustle of a bush behind him, and he turned and saw the dark figure begin to raise its arm, but he was faster, and he pulled the trigger and the sound of the shot sent everything that lived in the trees around him skittering and cawing into the night. He walked forward, still aiming at the body that lay half shrouded by the dead leaves into which it had fallen, but he knew even before he even reached it. It was dark, and he couldn't see very well, but he could see well enough. He turned and stumbled on through the dark.

Smith was going to shoot me, Mason thought. Hell, call himself a professional, he was as scared as I was. If I hadn't shot him, he would have shot me. I'll tell Davey that the target shot Smith, he wouldn't believe I could shoot anyone anyway.

Mason limped through some bushes, and the ground disappeared suddenly from beneath his feet. He slid down an earth bank, losing hold of his gun on the way, and then he thumped into beautiful, hard tarmac. He ignored the pain in his ankle, jarred again by the fall, and kissed the road.

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Then he staggered to his his feet. He couldn't see his gun, spent a couple of moments looking around for it, then realized that he must have dropped it at the top of the steep bank. He tried to scramble up, but his ankle gave way and he slid back down again. Can't do it, he thought, and no time to try.

He took a gamble, turned left and hobbled along the road. After a minute or two he limped around a corner and saw the car, sitting in the driveway to the disused pumping station, and the anonymous family hatchback was the most beautiful thing that he had ever seen in his life.

Mason limped to the car as fast as he could, put his hand in his coat pocket, and thought for one desperate moment that he had lost the keys in the flight through the woods. Then he remembered that he had put them into his jeans so that they would be safe. He fished them out, unlocked the car door, and slid himself in. He didn't know how well he would be able to drive; the car was a manual transmission and it was his left foot that he had hurt, but if he had to drive the whole way back to London in first gear he'd do it.

Two hours, maybe a little more, and he would walk into Davey's office in the back room at The Palace, slap the keys to this rust heap down on the table, demand a large Macallan, not off the bar, the twenty-one-year-old stuff that Davey kept in his desk drawer, and he would take the first glass in one go and say Davey, I'm not doing another job like this for you, not ever. Send Con Murphy next time. Let him get shot at, barely escape with his life. Now pour me another, you owe me it.

Mason fitted the keys into the ignition, turned them.

Nothing happened.

He tried again.

Still nothing. No engine. None of the dashboard lights came on. Nothing. He looked out and saw that the bonnet was not quite back in place, as if someone had closed it without wanting to make too much noise.

"No," Mason said. "No oh no oh no," and he opened the car door again and staggered out, but the woods were already coming alive with a startled flurry of crows as someone walked through the undergrowth, not bothering to keep quiet anymore, the footsteps unhurried, all the time in the world.

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# THE PORCUPINE TREE

## EVE FISHER

By noon the wind had died down and it was warmer—about twenty-five degrees—mainly because a thick blanket of clouds had rolled in. For South Dakota, that wasn't bad at all, and of course, Don Nordstrom didn't care because he was dead. I looked over at the three hunters—Larry Halberg, Jim Mackenzie, and Dave Nelson—who'd found him.

"So you were coming over the rise and then what?" I asked.

"We saw him lying there," Larry said. He was the one who'd come to get me at the lodge. "I saw his feet first."

I nodded. Don's feet were splayed out in the snow like broken boats. Up toward his head there was a fair amount of red snow. Since he was face down, I was willing to wait to turn him over until Randy Walworth, the coroner, showed up. "You hear a shot or anything?"

"Come on, Grant," Dave said. "We were hunting."

"I meant in between your shots," I said. Everyone shook their head. "How'd you do?" I asked.

"Half a dozen pheasant apiece," Dave replied.

"Not bad. Where's the dog?" I asked.

"We didn't bring any," Larry said. Dave started to say something, but Larry continued, "Don went off by himself early on and took his dog with him. Him and Jim had a bit of a disagreement."

"But that's all it was," Dave said hastily. "You know Don. He got huffy and went."

I looked down at the ground. The snow was so churned up you couldn't tell who—or what—had been where. "You guys trampled this up pretty good," I said.

"Well, hell, Grant, we had to see if he was alive," Larry protested.

"True." I looked over at Jim. He was standing apart from us, looking at Don as if he were trying to figure something out. "Jim stay with you guys the whole time?" I asked.

Dave and Larry looked relieved that I'd asked. "You betcha," Dave said.

"Never out of our sight," Larry said.



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I nodded. "You okay, Jim?" I called out.

Jim looked over at us and said, awestruck, "He killed himself. The son of a bitch killed himself." He shook his head. "It'll break Jennie's heart."

Make her day more like, I thought. But I didn't say anything.

Detective Jonassen, Bob Johnson, and Randy showed up together. Jonassen asked the same questions I had and sent the three men back to the lodge. Then things got unpleasant. After Bob shot photographs of Don from the back, we rolled him over. Part of his jaw was gone, and it took a lot not to delight Jonassen by throwing up in front of him. Bob Johnson took more photographs, Randy did his in-field examination, we bagged up the evidence, including the rifle, and then the four of us carried the body up to Randy's hearse.

After Randy drove off, Jonassen turned to me and asked, "How'd you get out here so damn quick? I thought you were on vacation."

I thought of mentioning enthusiasm, but I stuck with the truth. "I am. Here at the lodge," I said. "We're having a fraternity reunion and hunting party."

"You didn't go to college with Nordstrom."

"No, high school."

"A high school fraternity?"

"It was unofficial."

Jonassen shook his head. "Figures. It's going to be hard, telling his wife."

"Vera's not here. She's still in treatment," I said.

"She's getting out next week," Jonassen replied, and I remembered that Vera Nordstrom was Paula Jonassen's first cousin. Or maybe second.

"Maybe they could keep her longer," I suggested. "To help her through the crisis."

"Keep her from drinking?" Jonassen shook his head. "If she's going to, she's going to. But this sure as hell won't help." The wind picked up, making his eyes water. The sun, which had been like a flashlight in fog, went out. "Well, we'd better get over to the lodge and take statements."

There had been a dozen of us in that unofficial fraternity, but Gene and Rick had been killed in a car wreck our senior year, Jeff and Bud had moved to Minneapolis and Hawaii respectively, and that left six of us in Laskin: Larry, Dave, Jim, Bob Olson, myself, and Don. Now we were five, and we were all at the lodge. Dave had brought his wife, Lizbeth, but Jim's wife, Sally, was in Tahoe waiting for their divorce to be final. Lizbeth had brought a cousin, Judy, hoping she'd click with Larry, but he'd seemed to be interested in Jennie Nolan, who used to be Jim's mistress, but I'd thought she had come with Don this time, except they'd had separate rooms like Linda and Bob, who everybody knew were just old friends. I had come solo, if you must know. It was a lot less complicated.

When we got back to the lodge, Jonassen remembered that I was on vacation, so I went back upstairs and had some lunch while he and Bob Johnson took statements from everyone in the manager's office. When I

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came out of the dining room, no one was around except Linda Thompson and Bob Olson, who were sitting on the couch in front of the fire in the lobby, looking at a camera.

"Where'd everybody go?" I asked.

"Back to their rooms," Linda said. "And the girls aren't back from Brookings yet."

I let out a sigh. There was going to be hysterics when they returned. Especially from Jennie.

"I've decided it's all our fault," Bob said. "I told Linda, every time we go anywhere outdoors together, it's a disaster."

"I've heard the stories," I said, pouring myself a cup of coffee from the machine. "You may be right."

"Stop camping and save the world?" Bob asked. I snorted in spite of myself, and we all started laughing.

"Hush," Linda said semi sternly. "This is a lodge of mourning."

"Oh, well, if you want to get technical . . ."

"I want to get official," Linda said, ignoring Bob. "Unofficially, of course. What do you think happened?"

"I don't know," I replied. "It looks pretty good for accidental death. Can't see suicide, but that's what Jim suggested. Is there anything I should know?"

"Jennie and Jim are back together," Bob said. "Don might have been brokenhearted about that."

"I thought she'd come with Don," I said. "When did they split up?"

"I guess as soon as Sally went off to Tahoe," Bob replied. "That's all that Jennie was waiting for. Or Jim, for that matter."

"Why the hell didn't they just get married back in high school?" I asked no one in particular.

"Jim was seeing Tina, and Jennie was busy with Neil," Linda said casually. I glanced at her: She was about the only person in Laskin who would say that name around me. But then, I was probably the only person who would mention Gary Davison around her.

"I'd forgotten about that. So, where were you two today?"

"Oh, thank God you asked," Linda said. "I was beginning to think we didn't count."

"We went on a five mile hike," Bob said.

"Two miles," Linda disagreed.

"Linda wanted to take pictures. Take a look." I bent over and peered into the screen. "See," Bob continued, "there I am by the lodge door. There's some tracks in the snow. There's a bush. There's a rock. There's me by another bush. There's some more tracks in the snow. A tree. A rock. Yet another bush." Actually, the nature shots were pretty good, and I told Linda so.

"Thanks. Check this one out," Linda said. "This is over by Olson's Draw." It was a tall cottonwood, with a yellow bush wedged up in one of the bare

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branches. "Looks like a bush, right?" Linda asked. "Watch this." She'd zoomed in with the next couple of photos, and the yellow bush turned out to be a porcupine.

"You ever see a porcupine in a tree before?" Linda asked, and I had to admit I hadn't. "What on earth it was doing there—"

"I keep telling you, some kind of predator," Bob said. "Has to be."

"All I spotted were dog tracks," Linda said. "I took a picture . . ."

"Where did you say that was?" I asked.

Linda opened her mouth, but the door opened and the other women came in on a rush of cold air and chatter.

"What's the police car doing outside?" Jennie asked, shaking a wave of perfume out from her coat.

"I'm afraid there's been some bad news," I said. "There was a hunting accident. Don's dead."

Jennie's blue eyes widened, she gasped, and then she slumped to the floor.

"How could you do that?" Lizbeth cried, bending over Jennie. "You couldn't break it to her gently? Jennie. Jennie."

"Oh, no," Jennie murmured. "Oh, no. No, no, no. No!" She started screaming. Lizbeth and Judy tried to calm her down, but she kept on screaming until Jim came running down the hall and put his arms around her. She collapsed then, weeping, and he half carried her away, her blonde mane trailing over him the way it does on the covers of those romance novels. I turned back toward the women, and saw Jonassen standing in the doorway.

"Nicely done," he criticized.

"I hope you fire him," Lizbeth said.

"He's not on duty," Jonassen told her. "Though that does mean you should have waited for me to talk to her."

"She asked," I defended myself.

"You—" Lizbeth began, but Jonassen interrupted.

"Mrs. Nelson, could I have a word with you and your friend?"

"Gladly." Lizbeth and Judy swept past me into the manager's office.

"Don't go away," Jonassen said. "I want a word with you later."

"I'll be here," I assured him. Though what I really wanted to do was go up by . . . "Where was that porcupine?" I asked Linda.

"See, you're just as fascinated as I am."

"Great. You two can go over it one more time." Bob yawned. "I'm going to take a nap. Five miles is enough for one day."

"*Two*," Linda said. After he left, we sat back down on the couch and looked through the pictures again. After a while Linda said, "By the way, about Don. I don't think . . . No, I *know* he didn't have any intention of suicide." I looked at her encouragingly. "He was looking forward to when Vera got out of treatment. He knew that before we got divorced, Gary went in once . . ." She gave a strained laugh. "Trying to save our marriage. Anyway, I was some-

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body Don could talk to. I really believe Don got involved with Jennie just because he was desperate and lonely. She was a fling, but nothing more. I'm not saying it was right, but . . . when Vera went into treatment things changed. Don went every weekend to see her, did the couples therapy, went to meetings, the whole nine yards. And she was doing well. He was talking about taking her to Arizona for a few weeks when she got out. Said Fred could handle the car dealership while he was gone."

"Fred? Not Larry?"

Linda's eyebrows twitched. "Fred's his nephew. Besides, Larry was a little . . . enabling with Vera. I just know it's not suicide."

"So you think it was an accident."

"What else could it be?"

"I'm not sure," I said.

"Look," Linda said, "I know you're down on Jennie, but she's not a killer. Besides, she was in Brookings all morning shopping."

"Did I say Jennie?"

"No, but—"

I looked at the picture of the porcupine in the tree. "You up for another walk?"

"It'll be gone by now," Linda pointed out.

"I just want to see the tracks. They might be important. Please?"

Just as Linda agreed, Lizbeth and Judy came out of the office, and Jonassen called out "Grant!"

I went in and sat down. "You want to know where I was this morning?" I asked.

"I know where you were. You watched the *Today* show after breakfast, played video games with the chef until ten, and then you were sitting in the lobby reading a book until Larry came busting in at eleven thirty to say Don had been shot." I should have known he'd already checked. Jonassen is thorough. "So, consider yourself back on duty as of eleven thirty. I'll tell Jean and she'll clock you in. Now, what do you think?"

"I'm wondering where the dog was. Is. Don brought a hunting dog with him. I know he did because Bob was fussing at Linda for making him leave Elsie at home."

"He the only one who brought one?"

I nodded. "Jim's dog died last year in some kind of accident, and Lizbeth won't let Dave have any. She says it's cruelty to animals."

"I'll bet she does," Jonassen muttered. "You'd think it would stick around its master's body."

"Unless it didn't like him," I pointed out.

"Do you always have to say crap like that?" Jonassen was truly offended.

"I'm sorry," I said, and meant it. "No, the dog . . . I'm thinking of going out to track it down." I told Jonassen about Linda's porcupine and the dog tracks below. "Between the two of us, we might be able to find it."

"Go. Keep me posted."

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"You going to be here for a while?" I asked.

"Got to talk to Jennie Nolan when she recovers from the shock you put her in. After that I'll head back. Call me when you get in."

Linda had filled up a flask of hot coffee and bundled herself back up while I was talking. Outside, Linda looked up at the solid light gray sky and said, "Snow sky."

"All the more reason to get out there before the tracks are covered up."

We hiked along the west ridge, following Linda and Bob's earlier trail, until we got to Olson's Draw.

"That's the tree," Linda said.

"No porcupine now," I replied, looking around: It wasn't that far from where Don had been shot.

"No predators."

We walked carefully around the tree. There were dog tracks everywhere. The dog had obviously been excited, running, jumping.

"You can see where he's run a couple of times down there," Linda said, pointing toward where Don had been shot. "But he kept coming back. And then there was something over that way that grabbed his attention." She started to walk off toward the northeast, over the rise and down into a little shallow valley. I followed, making sure to walk in her footsteps. I'd learned years ago that while Linda hated hunting, she was a damned good tracker. She likes to go out and watch animals in the wild. A little ways farther down, Linda said, "Look—footprints. The dog ran up to meet whoever it was. Not Don."

"Those prints weren't made by Don's clodhoppers," I agreed. But they were men's shoes, thickly treaded, with an S-curve running down the outside of the sole. I looked back. From here, you could see the tree, but not the other side, where Don, presumably, had been taking a break, waiting for his dog to come back. "Can you get a close-up photo of those?"

"Sure can. Hey, look over here." There was a small depression, with some reddish-brown scraps still left.

"The dog ate something," I said.

And then the dog had gone on, obviously following whoever had fed it. By now we'd crossed the valley and were coming up on another rise. At the top, we could still see the big porcupine tree behind us, and in front was another shallow valley, with a small frozen pond and a few rocks in the center. We started walking down, when Linda gasped and said something unprintable.

"What?"

Linda pointed, and I realized that one of the rocks was the dog, and the shadow—I should have known there couldn't be a shadow under a snow sky—was blood.

"It was shot," Linda said, her voice tight.

I stopped her from kneeling by it. "I need photographs of this," I said. "If you can't—"

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"Oh, I can," Linda said. She took a dozen, from all angles, and then asked, "You think he shot it before or after he shot Don?"

"Had to be before," I said. "It wouldn't have left Don's body. Shall we see where our boy went?"

We took up the killer's footprints again. They took us in a wide loop, down along the backside of the gentle swells. I was beginning to think we might be dealing with some kind of anonymous nutcase when suddenly, finally, they took a sharp left. Half a mile more, and we came upon a knot of willows, where a couple of other guys had been waiting. There all the footprints milled together, and down in the snow was the stub of one of the mini-cigars Jim Mackenzie smoked whenever he was out hunting, the ones with the plastic tip. Linda photographed it, as she had the entire trail. Then we followed the group's tracks as they headed northeast, away from everywhere we'd been before.

"Where the hell were they going?" I asked.

Linda shook her head. "I think toward the Havard Slough. God only knows why." We walked on, and then Linda said, "Our boy broke off here."

"Lead on," I said. Within a few minutes, we were back down at the hollow where Don's body had been found. "Down and back," I said. "To meet up again with the other two and tell them that he didn't see a thing." We followed our boy back to the group, and then, after another long circle, the group ended back at the hollow, where they could all discover Don's body together.

I turned to Linda and said, "You'd have made a fortune in the fur trade days."

"Calamity Jane in another life."

"I guess we'd better get back to the lodge."

"What about the dog?" Linda asked.

"I hate to say it, but we have to leave it there until I can get Jonassen out. It's evidence."

"You're right," she sighed.

We'd been gone over three hours, and it was almost dark by the time we walked up the steps to the lodge. We were both exhausted. Linda went to her room to upload the pictures to her laptop in case of accidents. I went up to the lobby desk and asked the manager to borrow his office and telephone. I called Jonassen and told him what we'd found, and after we'd discussed things I went into the bar.

Jennie was sitting with Jim and Larry at a table in front of the sliding glass doors that led out to the deck, while Linda and Bob were at a table next to them, looking at Linda's laptop. I went to join Dave at the bar and ordered a beer.

"So where have you been?" Dave asked.

"Me and Linda took a long walk. She wanted to talk."

"Bob'll be jealous, if you don't watch out," Dave said.

"Nah, she wanted to talk about Don." I glanced down at Dave's shoes:

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an old pair of rubber-bottomed hunting boots that to my knowledge he'd had for ten years. They weren't what I was looking for, and I was glad. "They were kind of buddies. Or at least, he came into the courthouse a lot, and they'd talk. She was upset."

"We're all upset. I can't believe it. Man, you hear about hunting accidents every day, but you never think it'll be someone you know."

I nodded. "Listen, I found Don's dog," I said quietly. "Dead. Somebody shot it."

"Jesus," Dave said.

"Good. Course, it's possible that Don shot it himself, by accident, and was so upset, well . . ."

"Yeah."

"On the other hand . . . Dave, you sure that Jim was never out of your sight this morning?"

"Never," Dave replied. "I swear to God. Him and me were together the whole time."

"What about when Larry went scouting the territory? Jim stuck with you?"

"He sure did," Dave said. "Never left my side."

"Thanks, Dave." I went over to Jim's table.

"Oh, God, here comes Grant," Jennie groaned. She was dressed in black, which might have been mourning, and was fairly drunk. "You know, you've always been bad news to me. So what do you want this time?"

"I just wanted to talk to Jim and Larry," I said, walking around to get a better view of their feet.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jim asked.

"Checking out your shoes. My feet are freezing, and I need a new pair."

Jim laughed, but then his boots were like Dave's, only shearling lined. It was Larry who lunged out of his seat, toward the doors behind him. I grabbed for him, but it was Bob Olson—signaled by Linda—who tripped him flat on the floor. I leaped on his back and barked, "Linda, get a shot of his shoes!"

Linda was flashing the camera like a paparazzo before anyone got over their shock.

"What's going on?" Jennie asked.

"Done," Linda said.

I hauled Larry up by his collar and slammed him back down in the chair. Two patrol cars were coming up the drive, their lights pulsing. Larry was slightly green, but he stood his ground.

"What's all this about?" Larry blustered. "I didn't do anything—"

"Yes, you did," I said. "You killed Don, and you killed his dog."

"You?" Jennie gasped. "*You* killed him? Wha—D'you really think I'd have anything to do with a *salesman*?"

Larry looked at her incredulously. "You think this has anything to do with *you*? He was going to fire me! The night he dumped you, he told Fred—"

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"He did not dump me!" Jennie shouted, leaping to her feet. Jim grabbed her arm.

"He dumped you for that drunk wife of his!" Larry shouted back as I held on to his collar.

"That drunk wife is my wife's cousin," Jonassen said from the door. He's got quite a voice. It shut them both up. He gestured to Bob Johnson. "Arrest him, read him his rights. Jim, I suggest you take Jennie somewhere less upsetting."

There was a flurry of activity, and then Bob Olson, Linda, and I were alone with Jonassen, who took off his hat and said, "What I want to see is this porcupine in a tree."

Linda laughed and brought over her laptop. "Here it is."

Jonassen looked through the entire cache of pictures. "You've got hunter's instincts, that's for sure," he said. Thankfully, Linda took it as a compliment. "The next time you want to go camping, you call me, not Bob."

"I've got first dibs," I said. Linda blushed.

"Wait a second!" Bob Olson protested.

But Jonassen was up and moving. "Come on, Grant."

I turned in the door and winked. "Stop camping, save the world."

## Solution to the December Dying Words

**WORD LIST**

A. Odd Fellow
B. Twister
C. Toffee
D. Obviously
E. Platform
F. Eerie
G. New World
H. Zinfandel
I. Look-alike
J. Eldest
K. Rowboat
L. Toothed
M. Hot potato
N. Enthusiast
O. Childish
P. Repugnant
Q. Ivory Coast
R. Middle Ages
S. Edwin Booth
T. Survive
U. Cotton to
V. Educate
W. Now and then
X. Entreat

**QUOTATION**

Author—Otto Penzler
Work—THE CRIME SCENE *(New York Sun,* September 6, 2006.)

"It would not be at all a stretch to say that Nero Wolfe is the most beloved of all American detectives. . . . With nearly four dozen books devoted to Wolfe and Archie Goodwin . . . one would think Stout devoted his entire life to putting words on paper."

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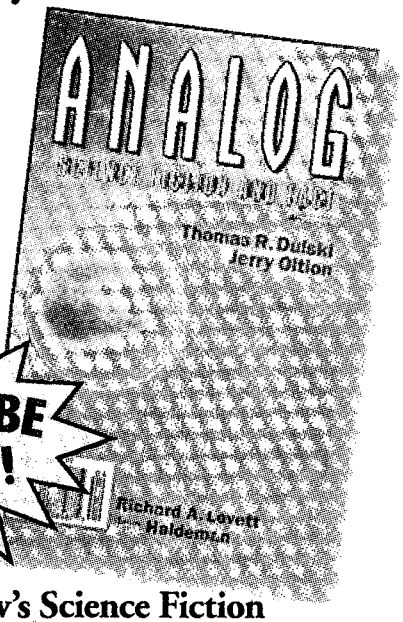

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# THE STORY THAT WON

**The July/August Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Deborah Lashley of Kingsport, Tennessee.** Honorable mentions go to Tom Petersen of Ramona, California; Michael Penncavage of Oak Ridge, New Jersey; A. M. Gavin of Los Angeles, California; Kathleen Chencharik of South Royalston, Massachusetts; Zoey Martinez of Surfside, Florida; Jon Brunette of Brooklyn Park, Minnesota; Judith Fawley of Pensacola, Florida; Benjamin H. Foreman of Harbor Oaks, Florida; Diane Coutré of Santa Monica, California; and Olga M. Zulich of Valparaiso, Indiana.

Hill Street Studios/Blend. © Images.com

## RIGHT OR WRONG

DEBRA LASHLEY

The small, laid-back town, where "nothing ever happened," was ideal. The only bank had minimal security via a sleepy-eyed guard. You'd think it'd be simple to create a diversion, rob the bank, and get outta Dodge. Right? Wrong!

My job? Rob the bank. Darnell's? Create a diversion. Easy! Except this time, he had a new idea. When we drove into town, we noticed a microphone, amplifier, and lighting on a building rooftop. Weird, but it gave Darnell his idea. With his guitar, he'd give an impromptu show.

That night, when Darnell got up on that roof and sang, the whole town showed up, including the guard. Seeing him was my cue to exit. The streets were empty. The easiest bank robber ever! Right? Wrong!

Who knew Darnell had mega talent? Who knew the sleepy-eyed guard would be sharp-eyed enough to come running back to the bank for a camcorder to record Darnell for YouTube? You'd think I'd have a Plan B. Right? Wrong!

That guard caught me red handed! Since he'd already grabbed the camcorder and was testing it, he caught me on film! Even smarter, he handcuffed my arms and feet to the bars, locked the bank, ran to Darnell's show, and filmed his final act.

The guard got fifteen minutes of fame from the YouTube video.

Darnell got millions from a music contract.

I got ten years for attempted bank robbery.

Wrong? You're darn right!



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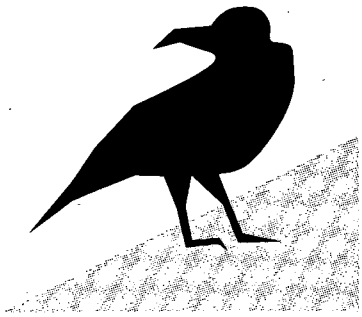


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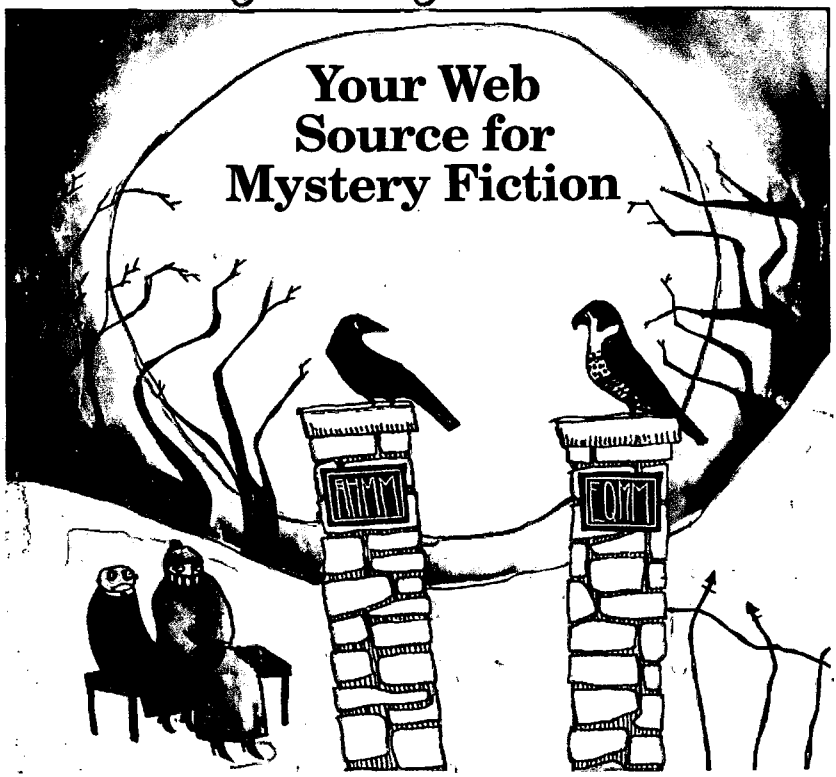


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